

***"They don't like us and
they never will!"*** had been Mike

Vincent's dying words about the Double Diamond outfit, as he entrusted the Big Five spread and his young daughter, Su, to foreman Link Asbell.

And Link quickly found bitter truth in the old man's warning when one of the Big Five's top hands was burned to death and a nearby rancher was gulched and nearly killed.

There was no proof. But just by "coincidence" both men had stood in the way of a Double Diamond cattle run into the Big Five's coveted Saddleback Hills country.

For a man of deeds, dangerous "coincidence" is as good as proof, especially when the law is hamstrung.

So Link Asbell hit the trail to fight fire with lead-slinging fire!

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**TOUGH
SADDLE**

MATT STUART

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TOUGH SADDLE

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Tough Saddle

PUTTING HIS HORSE to the trail's steady lift, Link Asbell climbed out of the shadowed depths of Rosebud Canyon to the high meadows and timbered benches of the country beyond. Here he was met with the boisterous push of the cooling wind that at this time of day and season of the year always poured down out of the loftier reaches of the Saddle-back Hills to replace the warm, rising thermals of the plains.

Smoke odor rode the wind, which, mused Asbell, faintly smiling, was to be expected. For Paeky Lane, as methodical in all the details of his daily living as he was crotchety and stubborn and completely faithful, would be cooking supper at this hour. By sundown the meal would be eaten, dishes washed and put away, and Paeky sitting outside the line camp cabin door, nursing his rancid old pipe while watching twilight come down across the world.

At full dark he would knock the dottle from his pipe and seek his blankets. Tomorrow morning he would be up while the stars were still bright, and by the time dawn's first green flare exploded out of the eastern plains, be done with breakfast and in his saddle, ready for the work of the day. There was no better or more dependable line rider in the business than Paeky Lane.

As Big Five foreman, Link Asbell made this riding every third week. One purpose was to get Paeky's frequent and always accurate report on the Rosebud Creek summer range and the condition of the Big Five cattle grazing it. Another was to fetch a fresh supply of food such as corn meal in the well stuffed flour sack behind Asbell's saddle. In that sack

besides the regular staples, there was a bottle of whiskey from Ben Dillon's Imperial bar in town.

This Packy would guard and ration with loving care, so making it last until next visit, when a fresh bottle would show. For Packy was an old man who had reduced the problems of living to their simplest parts, and long since had learned how to wring the final drop of contentment from each.

Asbell's horse, a solid, clean-limbed buckskin, had been leaning steadily and sturdily into the lift of the hills. Now it broke stride and blew sharply, swinging its head in sudden uneasiness. For the smoke scent had abruptly thickened and it was not the clean, tangy breath of good, fat pine stove-wood. Instead, it was shot through with a queer mustiness which changed the musing smile on Asbell's lips to a pull of wry distaste. He stood high in his stirrups and searched the world all about with probing senses.

Ahead, the trail crossed a narrow bench, climbed a short lift and circled past a thicket of jackpine timber. Beyond lay the little flat that held the line camp. Asbell put the buckskin to a scrambling rush up the last rise and on past the timber thicket. Here he reined to an abrupt stop.

Where the line camp cabin had stood was just a ragged area of charred blackness. From the center of this lifted waves of heavy, foul smoke, to be caught and whirled away by the wind.

Asbell sent the buckskin closer, the animal protesting with tossing head and a gusty blowing. It edged to another uneasy halt and Asbell let it stay so, while, through a long pause, his glance fixed on the blackened cinder pile.

In saddle and out, he was a tall, sparsely built man, possessed of an unsuspected rawboned physical power. His facial features were ruggedly irregular, with a level mouth above a hard sweep of jaw line. He was very brown, and against this deep weathering of his skin his eyes were a strong, clear blue, eyes that on the occasion of need could hold the bleakest of chills. The chill was in them now, and deepening.

For, jutting up out of the mounded cinders was the gaunt

skeleton of an old iron bunk, its metal frame and springs having defied the flames. On that fire-scorehed bunk lay an object that had once been a man. Now it was just a twisted, blackened nightmare.

Another gust of turgid, greasy smoke enveloped Asbell, putting a sudden nausea in his stomach and the lift of bile in his throat. He reigned the fretting buckskin away and around to what had been the rear of the cabin. Here, a little apart, stood a small pole corral. Yonder, at the edge of the clearing was a boxed-in spring, its seepage feeding a straggling smear of green across the short flat. In the corral were two horses, and a saddle straddled the top rail of the fence.

Clear of the smoke, Asbell made another careful survey of the blackened debris. How had this thing happened? Without doubt, that object on the bunk was all that was left of the mortal remains of Paeky Lane. Had he fallen asleep while smoking, with a live spark spilling from his pipe to set his bedding afire? Possible, Asbell conceded, but not likely. Such conjecture did not jibe with Paeky's fixed schedule of daily living. The old fellow did not take to his bed until he was prepared to stay there for the night. And this was Paeky's supper time, not his bed time.

Had the fire started from the stove? Again a possibility, but hardly probable unless for some reason the stove had upset. But it hadn't upset. It was still upright, out there in the midst of the black wreckage.

What to do? Very little, right now, Asbell decided grimly. Those smoking coals and cinders were still far too hot to get into. By morning they would have cooled. Time enough to return then with help and tools to dig a grave. In the meantime he'd take Paeky's horses and saddle back to headquarters with him.

It was a relief to turn to something that pulled one's eyes away from that object on the bunk. Asbell dismounted and moved up to the corral. He stopped, staring at Paeky's saddle. Something was wrong, here. A moment later he had it.

Fashioned from long habit, even the chore of unsaddling had become a ritual of exactness with Paeky Lane. When

done, his saddle always occupied a certain space on the corral fence, marked to a darkened smoothness by much contact. Also, the blanket would be spread across the saddle to air and dry. Neither of these things were so now. The saddle was a good two yards from its usual place, and the blanket, instead of being spread across it, was bunched under it.

Asbell's glance, ever sharpening, searched the earth about the corral gate. Here was a tangle of hoof prints and the occasional gouge of a boot heel, all too blurred and mixed up to signify anything. There was, however, one item that caught and held attention. About a darkened patch of dust by one gate post, a scatter of green flies buzzed and crawled. With a boot toe, Asbell stirred up some of the eaked dust, then dropped to one knee for a closer survey.

Presently straightening, he had another long, wary look at the world round about. All sound was the rush of wind in the timber tops, all movement the dip and twist of these same leafy crests. Here and there the last sunlight of the day held a high-up, glinting touch, but close to the earth the coiling, flowing shadows were turning blue and heavy.

One final time Asbell marked the smoking pile with its grisly content, after which he moved with swift purpose. He caught up the horses in the corral and loose-cinched Paeky Lane's saddle on one of them. Stepping astride the buckskin and with the other two animals at lead, he went back the way he had come, down through Rosebud Canyon and out the mouth of this along the creek into the far-running, and now deep-darkening miles of the plain.

The Big Five headquarters was an oasis of light in the plain's wide blackness. Windows of the ranchhouse were aglow, winking and beckoning. The hitch rail which curved in a quarter circle in front of the ranchhouse patio held several driving rigs along with some saddle mounts. Swinging past these, well out, Link Asbell heard the babble of voices and the high glitter of a woman's laughter lift across the night.

At the corrals the lank figure and slow drawl of Hughie Logan evolved from the star-shot shadows.

"What's this—what's this? Cowboy, you're not supposed to be back until tomorrow sometime. Wouldn't Paaky put you up for the night? You must have forgot his liquor?"

Asbell dropped from his saddle, bluntly giving out his grim information.

"Paaky's dead, Hughie."

"What! Dead?"

"That's it. And burned to a cinder."

"Oh, no!" protested Hughie swiftly.

"Yes," Asbell insisted. He stamped in a short circle to rid himself of riding stiffness. "The line cabin is just a pile of smoking coals. What's left of Paaky is lying on that old iron bunk of his. I don't know how it happened. I only know what I saw and what I know is so. Things were still too hot for me to get close enough to do more than look."

For some little time Hughie Logan was still. Then he swore softly.

"That sure is hell! Poor old Paaky. How could it have happened?"

"You guess," Asbell said bleakly. "That's all I can do." He glanced over at the glowing ranchhouse. "Another lively evening going on, looks like."

"Yeah—lively." Hughie's tone was disgruntled. "The boss, she got the idea kind of late, this time. She's had Tonio riding all afternoon, carrying the word. Then he had to bring one of Rosa's relations out from town to help. Damned if I can figure Sue Vincent any more. Seems she can't think of anything these days except a continual round of this whoop-de-do. But getting back to Paaky. We got to do something, Link. We can't just leave the old feller there the way you say he is."

"We're not going to," Asbell said. "First thing in the morning we ride out there, you and me." He looked at the ranchhouse again. "Who's here?"

"Usual crowd. Some from town. Then Tom and Cathy Grant drove over. So did Nels and Mandie—Madison. Of course, as you might expect, Mister Frank D. on hand."

Asbell untied the sack of food from behind his saddle.

"Put the horses away, Hughie—and catch me up a fresh one. I'm for town as soon as I get some supper. I want to see Doc Jerome about Packy."

He tramped around to the rear of the ranchhouse and stepped into a kitchen full of light and warmth and the stir of anxious activity. Here Tonio Diaz was busy with a steak knife over a loin of beef, while his wife, Rosa, bustled about the big ranch stove. Steam and savory odors swam through the room, sharpening the bite of Asbell's hunger.

Rosa turned at sound of his entrance. She was a buxom woman, her round, olive cheeks strong with color from the stove's warmth. She glanced at the sack of food.

"It was not needed, Señor Link?"

"Not needed, Rosa." He lowered the sack into a corner. "Your mistress—I would speak with her."

Rosa hesitated, visibly distressed.

"If I call her away from her friends for even a little time, I know she'll be angry with me. Already today she has scolded me, though as always, I do my best."

Tonio Diaz, small, wiry and very swarthy, looked up from his work and spoke with a deep earnestness.

"My Rosa and I, Señor Link, we have given the good years of our lives to this house, faithful to it and to its people. It was our happiness to serve the old master while he was alive. We have watched the daughter flower from child to woman, and we have loved and cherished her as our own. Yet tonight, I must say this!

"The wisdom and strength of the old master is no longer with us, and the time has come when Rancho del Cinco Grande again stands in need of a strong man's will and sternness. For life, Señor Link, it cannot be all fiesta. You must see our mistress and make her understand that. If she will not listen to you, why then—then—I"

Tonio shook his head ruefully, turned up his hands and shrugged.

Asbell considered these two good people for a grave mo-

ment. Long and well had they served. Their loyalty and sincerity were beyond doubt. He nodded.

"I will see her and do what I can. After that I have business in town and will want supper before I leave."

"It will be waiting for you," Rosa promised.

Asbell went out into the night again and circled the lower east wing of the house.

In founding his ranch, Mike Vincent had brought to it certain definite ideas. As a brand he had chosen the first letter of his family name, and for a time the outfit had been known simply as the Vee ranch. Imaginative cowhands, however, seeking something more colorful and impressive, took to calling it the Big Five, and so it had become and so remained.

Another of Mike Vincent's fancies had been to fashion his ranchhouse in the shape of his brand, two long diverging wings containing between them a patio which faced the south. The house had been built of hill stone, its whitewashed walls fort-strong in their thickness, holding at bay the wind extremes that any weather might bring.

Except for a single arched entrance, the wide mouth of the patio was also walled. Within this area some fragrant plants wound between flower beds, with clumps of honeysuckle and Cherokee roses drenching the walls with color and a fugitive fragrance.

Just inside the patio entrance, Asbell paused, his glance quick searching. People stood about, some men spraying thinly from deep, coarsened canisters, which created an illusory mixture of half-light, half-dark, which gave substance to these people and their and their shadows of them the next.

From one group Nel's Madonna was being viewed, followed by his rolling laugh. A big man with a red face, with no guile in him at all. This he knew was the least less than a shout.

Carrying a tray, a young, well-dressed Mexican woman drifted about, and now and then poured the smooth coffee of a glass. The aromatic tang of the coffee brushed Asbell's nostrils and he knew that Charles Travers was out.

from town. A successful lawyer, and not at all averse to advertising it, Charley smoked only the very best cigars.

At Asbell's elbow, gently teasing, a woman's voice drifted up.

"It can't be! Not Link Asbell in person, finding time to mingle?"

He looked down at her. Slight and fair and always merry, Cathy Grant was a prime favorite with all who knew her.

"Woman," he charged, with mock severity, "you make me out a regular maverick. Am I really that bad?"

She laughed gaily.

"Perhaps not quite. But you are a sobersides, Link, always working, always with so much on your mind. Like now. Only half listening, while looking over my head for someone else. Could that someone possibly be Sue Vincent?"

He showed a brief grin. "How'd you guess? You locate her for me, Cathy, I'll ask Tom not to beat you any more."

Again came her merry laugh.

"Thank you, good sir—thank you kindly. I'll be happy to do my best. She was yonder with Frank Dalmar just a little bit ago."

Cathy slipped away through the scented shadows.

Asbell drew back slightly as he waited. The momentary lightness of his mood while talking to Cathy Grant, faded into somberness. Frank Dalmar, it seemed, was increasingly in the picture of late. Asbell hoped, when Sue Vincent appeared, that Dalmar wouldn't be with her. A moment later the hope was realized. Sue came alone out of the filtered glow.

As always, sight of her sent swift emotion gusting through him. No other woman, he vowed, ever walked quite like Sue Vincent. Smooth effortless grace was as natural to her as was breathing. Put a crown on that auburn head of hers and she'd match any queen who ever lived.

He stepped out of the deeper shadow and she saw him and came swiftly to him. Yet the moment she spoke, the warm glow of feeling left him. For her words were curt, her tone sharp with annoyance.

"What is it, Link? Couldn't it have waited until morning?"

He did not answer immediately, just stood quietly, a tall grave figure, still of face, intent of glance. They had known each other over a considerable time, had Link Asbell and Susan Vincent. When first met, he was a lean, silent, twenty-year-old cowhand, just signed on at Big Five by Mike Vincent, and she a dashing youngster in her middle teens who rode with breakneck abandon, all slim grace and wild-flying hair and flashing, gray-green eyes.

Well, that was ten long years ago, and it was, he thought becoming harder all the time to reconcile the open-hearted, exuberant girl of yesterday with this tempestuous, proud, and disturbingly self-centered young woman of today. In one respect, however, the resemblance was strong. The fresh beauty of the girl had become sheer loveliness in the woman.

Under the steadiness of his regard, Susan Vincent stirred restlessly.

"Well?" she demanded again. "Was it really necessary to bother me at this time with some trivial ranch business?"

Abruptly, real anger gripped Asbell and he answered with a matching curtness.

"I'll let you decide. I'm just in from Rosebud Creek. Packy Lane is dead up there—in the ashes of the cabin!"

The bleak pronouncement of fact jolted her. She caught her breath, gave a tight little cry.

"You're sure?"

"Of course. I was there. I know what I saw." He brooded a moment, then went on, his tone bitter. "And while you may consider it trivial ranch business, to me it's just a hell of a lot more important than all this sort of thing." His gesture took in the patio and the people it held.

She had paled at first word of Packy Lane's death. Now indignant color flamed in her cheeks.

"Do you have to be brutal? How could I have known you were bringing such word?"

Her voice broke slightly and a quick moisture glinted in her eyes.

"You couldn't, of course," he admitted, gruffly contrite. "Sorry. But what I saw has been riding me pretty hard."

She turned away, dabbing at her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief. Her tone was small, subdued.

"Packy was one of my favorites. How—how could such a thing happen?"

He shook his head. "Right now I don't know. But I intend making a good try at finding out."

There was an inference in his words, and an emphasis, that brought her around to face him again.

"You're suggesting it wasn't accidental?"

Asbell shrugged. "Knowing Packy, and the exact schedule of living he held to, all day and every day, both in time and detail, I'm taking nothing for granted."

"Then you are suggesting it." She paused, marking the impassive somberness of his mood, then went on, protesting. "Who would want to harm a kindly old man like Packy—who and why?"

"Maybe," Asbell suggested carefully, "they weren't thinking of him as an individual so much as they were him being a part of Big Five. Maybe, in hitting at Packy, they figured they were hitting at the ranch."

"But why would anyone want to do that? Link, you don't know. You're not certain of anything."

Again he was silent, his eyes narrowed in conjecture. Again he shrugged.

"Two things I'm very certain of. One is that Packy Lane is dead. The other is—there are those who fought Big Five in the old days."

It was her turn to make a gesture, a quick, dismissing one. "Old days long gone and long forgotten."

"Not so," he differed. "Gone, maybe—but certainly not forgotten."

"You're being ridiculous," she charged. "Why, one of my guests here tonight is Frank Dalmar."

"So I hear," nodded Asbell drily. "But old Jonas Dalmar isn't. Neither is Bardo Sampson. They're not here, but they're still around and very much alive. And," he ended, with a measured significance, "they do not like us and they never will."

She flared. "Dad's words. Must you always quote him?"

"Why not? He was as wise and long headed a man as I ever knew. And so many times I heard him say it. 'They do not like us and they never will.' Well, I believed Mike Vincent while he was alive. And what was true then is true now."

She made a restless turn, up and down.

"No one ever revered the memory of a father more than I do. Or loved one more dearly, or gloried more in his strength and fundamental goodness. But I was never blind to Dad's faults—and he had several. The worst was his stubborn refusal to admit, or accept change. He clung to all the suspicions and unrelenting hatreds of the bad old days. In such things he would never change, and he refused to believe anyone else would, either. And in that, Link, he was greatly wrong."

Asbell shook his head.

"I'm not so sure of that. Your father knew human nature exactly for what it was—and still is. Certainly I've seen no real change in it in my lifetime. And if Mike Vincent was of the old school, what makes you think Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson are not? They were of Mike Vincent's time, and every influence that touched him, must certainly have touched them. So, if Mike Vincent wouldn't change, what makes you think Dalmar and Sampson would, or have?"

She had no answer to this, and he went on.

"It's your ranch, Sue—Big Five is—and Paeky Lane was your rider. I thought you should know immediately what I found up there at the line camp. If the word has spoiled your evening, I'm sorry. But that was the way it had to be."

He went away then, through the patio entrance into the wide night beyond.

AT THE POKER table in the Imperial, Doc Jerome spread his cards and glanced across at Bardo Sampson.

"Three tens, Bardo."

Bardo Sampson had his look, cursed, spread stubby fingers and let his own cards flutter down like drifting leaves.

"Kings and jacks," he growled.

He was a thick, stocky man with coarse, grizzled hair. This wasn't the first hand to cost him. There had been several before it, and with each successive loss the color in his naturally florid face had deepened, the temper heat in his slightly protuberant eyes increased, and the surly outward roll of his heavy lips became more pronounced, laying upon him a look not far removed from a saturnine brutality.

At Doc Jerome's left, Jonas Dalmar leaned back, fished a cigar from a vest pocket and bit the tip off it with an impatient, twisting snap of his teeth. Gaunt and derisive, he was long of face, with a narrow jaw and a tight, sardonic mouth. His eyes were coal black, and, despite his near seventy years, his equally black hair showed only a slight dusting of gray. As Bardo Sampson's partner and joint owner of the Double Diamond brand, he felt free to comment as he pleased. So now, while searching another pocket for a match, he made nasal, caustic observation.

"Bardo, you can be the damnedest sucker! Won't you ever get it through that thick head of yours how weak two pair can be? If, in one pile, I had all the money you've lost, trying to buck threes with two pair, I'd need a wheelbarrow to haul it away!"

On Bardo's right, Whit Henderson murmured, "It's the picture cards. To Bardo they always seem bigger than they are."

Bardo had taken his partner's sarcastic jibe in glowering silence. But now he half turned and erupted savagely.

"Any time I need a two-bit storekeeper to tell me how to play a poker hand, I'll let you know, Henderson. Until then, keep your damn mouth shut!"

With his remark, Whit Henderson had meant only a casual joshing, for he was a mild, quiet man. When aroused, however, he had plenty of spirit. So now his retort was quick and to the point.

"Hell with you, Sampson! If a man can't lose a hand or two at poker without turning sore-headed and nasty, then he shouldn't play at all. Yeah, to hell with you!"

Doe Jerome, shrewdly reading the signs, glanced at the clock on the wall above the bar. He pushed back his chair.

"Getting along toward my sleep time. If I don't get home pretty quick, Addie will be coming after me. On the strength of this last hand I'll stand a nightcap all around. Ben!"

Behind the bar, Ben Dillon spread glasses and began opening a fresh bottle.

Over against the far wall, where he'd been sitting in a tipped-back chair, Sage Wingo stirred and showed interest. Better than a full hour ago he had come into the Imperial with the reek of fresh horse-sweat strong upon him. He had met a guarded, questioning glance from Jonas Dalton and had answered with the faintest of nods. After which he took a chair against the wall and with hat pulled low over his eyes, remained a silent, motionless figure. Now, however, Doe Jerome was buying, and whiskey on someone else's money was a thing Sage Wingo never refused, so he moved up to the bar with the rest of them.

Physically, he was a vastly ugly man in body and mind. He was bony and angular and loosely put together, while his head was startlingly large and round and his face heavy and puffed and soft looking. Muffin-faced was how Doe Jerome had once described him. But it was a massive face, with

ale, cold eyes as devoid of expression as were the features naming them.

A penurious, tightfisted man, Sage Wingo, fusty and untidy, his neutral-colored hair long and ragged about his ears and neck. Casually observed, the man was colorless and seemingly self-effacing. But he was the long time riding boss of the wide-spread Dalmar & Sampson holdings, and he owned a reputation for savagery and cruelty when aroused.

The hands of Ben Dillon's bar clock showed after eleven Outside, the town of Garrison lay dark and quiet under the stars. On riding in, Link Asbell figured the probability of finding Doc Jerome in bed at this hour of the night. However, there was light in the Imperial bar, and a buckboard and two saddle brones at the hitch rail, so he decided to have a look here, first. For sometimes Doc sat in on a Saturday night poker game.

Ben Dillon was just pouring the drinks when Asbell pushed through the door. Doc Jerome's greeting was immediate and hearty.

"Link! Get in on this one, boy. I'm buying—with Bardo's money."

Asbell did not answer until he'd had his full, careful look at the barroom and all it held. Then he nodded and dropped in between Doc and Whit Henderson.

"Thanks, Doc," he said, and acknowledged the others with a single word. "Gentlemen!"

Jonas Dalmar took the cigar from his lips and reached for his drink. But he held the glass half lifted while he made a sarcastic remark.

"Gentlemen, eh? Well, well! That sounds good, Asbell, but I wonder if you mean it?"

Asbell laid his glance on this sallow-skinned, acidulous man, caught the taunting glint in the black, glass-hard eyes.

"It doesn't pay to jump at conclusions, Dalmar," he said curtly. "For as it happens, I wasn't referring to you."

Liking nothing better than to dig the barb of a caustic tongue into someone else, Jonas Dalmar was, however,

man to enjoy having the bite of sarcasm turned back against him. The glint in his eyes deepened.

"I hear there's another soiree going on out at Big Five tonight. How is it you're in town, Asbell? Or is it that the hired help don't rate getting in on the fun?"

From the moment of his grisly findings on Rosebud Creek, along with the dark conjecture born of such, Link Asbell had been fighting back the pressure of bitter, steadily deepening feeling. Now, at Jonas Dalmar's sneering inference, he was doubly hard put to keep the lid on. At the same time, he pondered the cause of Dalmar's words and manner. For no apparent good reason, Dalmar seemed to be going out of his way to stir up an argument.

At Asbell's side, Doc Jerome spoke quickly.

"Does good whiskey have to wait all night? Here's health, everybody!"

"Right!" chimed in Whit Henderson, taking his cue from Doc. "Health!"

Appreciating the obvious efforts of Doc and Whit, Asbell looked at them, nodded and lifted his glass.

Drinks were put away and it seemed the taut moment was safely past. Then Bardo Sampson, down rail from Whit Henderson and Jonas Dalmar, made heavy comment.

"Susie Vincent sure is flying high and giddy these days, what with all her partyin' and gallivantin' around. Some folks are beginning to wonder if maybe she ain't—"

"Shut up, Sampson! Keep your tongue off Big Five and its people!"

Swinging back from the bar, Link Asbell laid out the words, solid and unequivocal as a blow.

Bardo came around, his prominent eyes scummed with the heat of renewed temper.

"Why damn you, Asbell! Who are you to tell me to close my mouth! I'll say what I please, when I please, any place I please. If I was ten years younger I'd teach you some manners!"

"If you were ten years younger," Asbell told him harshly,

"I wouldn't bother to tell you to close your mouth. I'd close it for you!"

The last man along the bar, it was now Sage Wingo who came away from it to stand at Bardo Sampson's shoulder, his big shock head thrust forward.

"I'm here, Asbell," he said, his voice a queerly moist and muffled thing. "And I'm ten years younger."

Up to this moment, Jonas Dalmar had remained facing the bar. But now Sage Wingo's words brought him around, his glance darting and speculative. In quick succession it touched Bardo Sampson, Sage Wingo, and finally, Link Asbell. Dalmar rolled his cigar across his lips and spoke tightly.

"Better than ten, Sage. Nearer thirty, and so, plenty young enough. Asbell here, seems to have gone a mite proud. Take it out of him!"

Doc Jerome cried quick protest.

"No! That's fool's talk, Jonas! Where's your good sense?"

Dalmar did not answer, but Link Asbell did, coldly sardonic.

"Maybe he hasn't any, Doc. But never mind. Seems he's dead set on starting something. Well—I"

He acted with the word, fast and ruthless, the pressure of feeling in him finally breaking into the open.

It wasn't Sage Wingo he made his first move toward, it was Jonas Dalmar. He grabbed the lank cattleman, hauled him clear of the bar, whirled him around and shoved him violently ahead. Expecting nothing of the sort, and caught thoroughly by surprise, Dalmar was unable to either set himself or resist. A powerful hand, locked in his collar, drove him headlong into Bardo Sampson.

Not for years had Jonas Dalmar carried a belt gun. But always, in a hip pocket, rode a snub-barreled one, and now he grabbed for it. But Link Asbell's free hand was there first, snatching the weapon clear and tossing it over the bar.

Done with Dalmar, Asbell sent him spinning aside. The cattleman, stumbling and floundering, collided with a chair, tripped over it and went down. His head rapped the floor and his hat rolled away and for a little time he lay there, sprawled

and angular and near stunned, the splintered stub of his cigar hanging loose in flaccid lips.

With Dalmar out of his way, Link Asbell went straight on into Bardo Sampson, giving him the solid bulk of a driving hard muscled shoulder full in the center of the chest. Off balance from having Dalmar slam into him, Bardo went down with a jarring crash before the power of Asbell's rush. And now Sage Wingo, in the clear and waiting, threw a savage punch.

Link Asbell had no chance to dodge or evade the blow, only time to drop his head slightly, so that Wingo's fist, instead of finding the angle of his jaw, landed high on the cheekbone under his left eye. Even so, it felt like he'd been hit with a rock, and momentarily the world went crazy for him. But the impetus of his rush carried him into Wingo, and he caught hold of the fellow and hung on.

Ungainly looking though he was, and gaunt almost to scrawniness, Sage Wingo was nevertheless deceptively powerful, with muscles like stringy rawhide and fists that were bony chunks of misery. Furiously he tried to break away, to haul clear and get in another full power blow. But Asbell stayed in there grimly, wrestling with his man while waiting for his head to clear.

Bardo Sampson, breath knocked out of him by successive violent impacts, first with Asbell's driving shoulder and then with the unyielding floor, rolled back and forth several times before being able to get to his knees. When he finally managed it, his eyes were blurred with a killing fury. He, too, carried a pocket gun, and now he began fumbling for it.

Ben Dillon came around the end of the bar at a run, yelling his sharp warning.

"Lay off that, Bardo! You hear me—lay off!"

Fast as Dillon moved, Whit Henderson was there ahead of him. The quiet, easy-going storekeeper hooked a hand under Bardo Sampson's chin and yanked hard back, spilling Bardo flat once more. He tore Bardo's gun away from him and poised it threateningly.

"Believe yourself or I dent your skull!"

the inky depths of his eyes. Also, rage made him tremble, made his voice high and shrill.

"God damn you, Asbell! You laid rough hands on me—on me, Jonas Dalmar—a man better than twice your age! So help me, before I'm done with you—!"

"Save it!" Breath running deeply in and out, Asbell broke curtly into the cattleman's furious sputter of words: "You had a gun in your pocket, and with no reason to trust you at all, I just made sure you didn't use it on me while I was taking care of your bully boy. You ordered the show started, Dalmar. Don't squeal because it worked out different than you figured."

Somewhat shakily, Dalmar located a chair and dropped into it, calling to Ben Dillon.

"A drink, Dillon. A good one!"

Dillon brought it to him, a stiff three-fingers. Dalmar put it away at a single avid gulp, pursing his lips and shuddering as the heavy charge of whiskey hit bottom.

Whit Henderson, who had been standing over Bardo Sampson, holding him out of the ruckus, now skidded Bardo's gun along the bar.

"Give it back to him when he's cooled off, Ben."

The storekeeper turned to Asbell, faintly smiling.

"Well done, Link. Damn well done!" He moved to the door and paused there, looking back at Doc Janna. "For the game and the drinks—thanks, Doc." With that he went on out.

Bardo Sampson climbed to his feet and glared around as though he would seek further combat with someone. But it was only the pale ash of his former turbulence. He'd been well shaken up, and now was glad to lean on the bar and beckon Dillon for a drink.

Link Asbell turned to Doc Janna.

"I came to town especially to see you, Doc. A little talk?"

"Sure, boy—sure!" Doc headed for the door. "Come along to the office."

Jonas Dalmar watched them leave, then put his black gaze on Ben Dillon.

his elbow on the bar and leaned heavily, head sagging, meaty face loose and stupid with daze.

"Good God!" Jonas Dalmar observed grudgingly. "He looks half dead. Asbell must have really punished him."

"You heard me say it," reminded Ben Dillon. "A tough hand, Link Asbell—riding a tough saddle!"

Garrison was a town of two streets. Center ran north and south, with the main bulk of the town's buildings scattered along it. About midway, Cross Street cut east and west, running out to lose either end in rubbish-strewn flats.

On the north side of Cross, and west of Center, Doctor Lemuel Jerome had his office in the two front rooms of a comfortable cottage set back from the street and guarded by a big locust tree. There was a light in the rear of the cottage and when Doc opened the front door and ushered Link Asbell in, a woman's serene, cheerful voice called forward.

"Lemuel?"

"Yes, Addie."

"You're not alone. Do you need me?"

Doc, having set a lamp alight, glanced at Link Asbell and chuckled as he answered.

"Only if you think a cup of hot coffee might be good for the beginnings of a first-class black eye."

"Lemuel Jerome—what are you talking about?"

She came along a short hall and turned into the office, a tall, strong woman, sweet faced, kindly, and with snowy hair. At sight of Asbell, she exclaimed.

"Link! Don't tell me that old steady you have been brawling?"

Doc chuckled again.

"I doubt that brawl is exactly the right word, my dear. Something considerably stronger would be nearer the truth. I never saw certain dignities so upset—literally! Link, you grab a chair. I'm putting some compresses on that eye, else it may swell shut on you. And, Addie—the idea of some coffee still goes."

"I don't want to cause any bother, Doc," Asbell protested. "What I got to say won't take long."

every move of his day. You could almost set your watch on him."

Doc considered soberly. "It's the fact that he was lying on the bunk that you can't accept?"

"Along with certain others," Asbell nodded. "And you know down was when Packy ate supper, not when he was in bed."

"All that could be very true," Doc admitted. "But don't forget that Packy was getting along in years and was a little past his age—well, things could happen to upset the best of schedules. He could have taken sick and so stayed in bed much earlier in the day than usual."

"And then set things afire?"

"If he'd been smoking, yes. Or if he'd been sitting on the stove while building a fire in the stove and didn't know to stop it, letting some live coals fall out. Something of the sort could have happened."

"That's right, it could," Asbell admitted. "I don't think that, but somehow still didn't feel the same about the possibility of such. And there were still other angles."

Doc shrugged.

"I won't say you're wrong. But I don't think you can trust a man's instincts in such things as murder. I'll go along with you. In the morning I'll tell you what I think in the mouth of Rosebud Canyon and then we'll see."

"Thanks, Doc." Asbell got up and went to the stable to get an extra saddle brone for the morning.

"Eight o'clock it is," Doc said.

around his left eye. This brought her up straight, exclaiming.

"Link! Your face—what happened?"

"I bumped into something."

"You've been fighting."

He considered her for a grave moment. "That's right."

"Who with?"

"Sage Wingo."

"Sage Wingo! Why?"

He did not immediately reply, but pulled a chair up to the table and settled into it. He took his hat off and dropped it on the floor beside his chair. He thumbed tobacco and papers from a shirt pocket and built a cigarette which turned out to be anything but a good one, for there was a soreness in his knuckles and a stiffness in his fingers which made them clumsy and fumbling. He must, he decided wryly, have hit Wingo harder than he realized.

Cigarette finally alight, he looked through the smoke at Sue Vineent.

"You should be in bed. Why aren't you?"

"I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I keep thinking about Packy Lane. Why did you fight with Sage Wingo?"

"Put it down that I never have cared for him."

"That won't do," she said flatly. "You're not the sort to get in a violent fight with somebody just because you don't happen to like them. What's the real reason?"

Again he peered at her through the blue, sifting smoke, silent for another short moment. He nodded.

"All right. I was looking for Doc Jerome. I found him in the Imperial with Whit Henderson. Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson and Sage Wingo were there, too. There was some talk. One word led to another until—well—that's it."

"You make it sound very simple and matter-of-fact. Which of course it isn't. Sage Wingo is riding boss for Dalmar and Sampson. If he fought with you while they were present, then it must have been with their consent."

Asbell's smile was faint and mirthless.

"Better than that. Dalmar sicked him on me."

"You mean—ordered him to fight you?"

"Link—you didn't!"

He got to his feet and took a restless turn up and down the office.

"I never actually hit either of them," he explained gruffly. "But I had to get past them to get at Wingo. So I shoved them around a little and took Dalmar's gun away from him. Whit Henderson did the same with Sampson."

Sue Vincent set white teeth against a soft, red underlip.

"I don't like it," she said again. "Risking big trouble over just a little talk. For that matter, why should they talk about me? What could they say?"

Asbell made another prowling swing about the room.

"As to the why, there are a couple of reasons. First, I'll say again what your father said. They do not like us and they never will. So they were out to stir up an argument and evidently figured some slighting talk was the best and quickest way. For the rest, well, there's been a lot going on around Big Five that hardly rates as legitimate ranch business. And when people don't like you, it doesn't take much to start them talking."

Deepening color stole through Sue Vincent's cheeks and her head tilted in a small flare of defiance.

"This activity you mention—would you by any chance be referring to my party tonight?"

"And a flock of others like it."

"Is there any good reason why I shouldn't have my friends in for a social evening if I want it so?"

"None at all—within the bounds of common sense. But as Tonio says, life can't be all fiesta."

"So—of Tonio would dare be critical, too, would he? Which is impertinence on his part, and I'll tell him so. If he and Rosa don't like the way things are around here, they can move out!"

"Whoa—hold it! That's no way to talk. That's spoiled kid stuff." Asbell perched on the edge of the table and looked down at her. "In fact, you should be ashamed of yourself."

Her small flare of defiance swiftly became a much larger one.

called them. Then, in town tonight, Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson go out of their way to stir up a ruckus with me. Why? Another sign, pointing to something?"

"Signs, you call them. Signs of what?" demanded Sue Vincent. "What are you driving at?"

"This," Asbell said curtly. "I'm trying to make you understand that Big Five could very well be facing something aimed at its very life. And because of that, there are so many things to think about more important than a continual round of good times."

"Nonsense!" she scoffed. "Pure stuff and nonsense! Naturally I feel terrible about Packy. I've thought of nothing else since you first told me about him. I could weep my eyes out if it would do any good. But I'm certain what happened was accidental. Which brings us to your fight in the Imperial. No doubt Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson had been drinking, and because of that, were loose-tongued. You took offense at some remark they made. It was as simple a thing as that. Now you're trying to read some deep and ominous significance into it all. Again I say—stuff and nonsense!"

Asbell gave her another moment of somber regard. He shook his head.

"You never used to be so cussed contrary. And you used to be smart—smart as a whip."

"Meaning," she said, with swift perversity, "that I'm no longer so? That I've become stupid?"

Again he shook his head.

"It's no use. I never could get anywhere with you trying to win a point with words. So I'll have just one more say, then call it a night. Here it is. Starting tomorrow, I don't want to see Frank Dalmar hanging around this ranch any more!"

For a moment she was too startled to speak. She just stared at him. Then the storm broke.

"That will do! You've said enough, Link Asbell! You've said more than enough! You presume far beyond your right. Frank Dalmar is my friend—my very good friend. He is welcome at any time. I'd remind you again that I am the owner

cent in any way. Yet, when something had to be done, what else to do but speak out?

He moved around to his chair and dropped into it. The remnants of his clumsily fashioned cigarette, so poorly shaped in the first place, now crumpled to pieces in his fingers. Methodically, he got out his smoking again and set about fashioning another, this time doing a much better job. He lighted it and sagged back in the chair, smoking slowly, trying to correlate the happenings of the past ten hours and wring the pattern of their real significance from them.

He had little luck. It was all a mixture of conjecture and fact, about as much of one as of the other. And the more he thought about it, the more the one ran into the other, until all was confusion. In the end he shrugged it into the background and put his thoughts on the slim girl who had so lately stood in this room with him, and where her personality still lingered, like some faint, elusive perfume.

He thought of her and of his obligations to her and all her interests. Aside from any personal feelings in this regard, there were the promises he'd made to a dying man—to Mike Vincent—only short hours before the cattleman slipped away into the shadows.

"You'll watch Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson, Link," was what Mike Vincent had said. "For they are the ones to do the most hurt and the ones most likely to try; though there is no telling, when I'm gone, who may get ideas about Big Five.

"Sue is a smart youngster," Mike Vincent had gone on. "Yet, as her mother was, she can be overly generous and prone to see good in people where there is none. And should the game turn rough, then it becomes a man's game. So you'll watch all things, boy, and give Sue a guiding hand, should she need it? And you'll care for Big Five as I might myself? You'll do these things for Sue and me and for the memory of the good days we've had together?"

These had been the dying thoughts and requests of Mike Vincent, and to them, Link Asbell had given his word. Now

the full weight of the accepted obligations was piling up on his shoulders.

Weary shoulders just now, whipped with some twenty hours of hard riding, somber tragedy and troubled thoughts. Finally, there had been the affair in the Imperial, which was the sort of thing to really take it out of a man.

A yawn gathered in his throat, forced itself to expression. He took a final drag at his cigarette, stubbed the butt, blew out the lamp and once again moved into the outer night.

Tuned to such things, he well knew the feel of these early morning hours sifting down out of the sky's great, black arch. A high, thin cloud drift, moving in from the southeast, dimmed the radiance of the stars somewhat, and a current of chill air, charged with all the ancient flavors of space, flowed close to the earth.

Against this he hunched his shoulders as he crossed the interval to the bunkhouse. Here he felt his careful way through a blackness peopled with the heavy, sighing breathing and dragging snores of sleeping men. He pulled off his boots, flattened out on his own bunk and was lost in sleep almost before he could draw a blanket over himself.

Coat collar turned up and a muffler about his throat to hold off morning's chill, Doc Jerome guided his buckboard team out of town and held to the road as far as Burro Wash, after which he cut northwest across the empty plains, aiming for the shadowed break in the solid run of the Saddleback Hills which marked the mouth of Rosebud Creek canyon. In the east the broad flare of the sun lifted out of the earth's flatness and spilled a fiery tide across the tawny plain, to make of Doc and his buckboard a sprawling, wavering shadow.

Long had these plains been Doc's active world, and in that time an abiding love for them had grown in him. In his comings and goings across them he had come to know them well, and nothing suited him better than to be abroad on them at the start of a new day, to watch the flushed dawn, with its streaming banners of crimson and gold, come marching down across the long miles, driving the misty blue shadows before

it. This morning, however, with many troublesome things on his mind, he paid little attention to day's fresh charm.

At the moment he was considering the past, the present, and the future, summing up all he knew of the first two, while pondering their significance and possible effect on the third. The answer he came up with was anything but satisfying or charged with comfort. So it was, when Doc struck the Rosebud Creek flats and found Link Asbell and Hughie Logan waiting there for him, the expression on his face spurred Hughie to a drawling remark.

"You must have had a hard night, Doc. You're mad as hell about something. Didn't you get any sleep at all?"

"Loss of sleep has nothing to do with it," retorted Doc with considerable vehemence. "It's pondering the imbecilities and general all-around cussedness of the human animal that puts a strain on my disposition. I sometimes wonder at the folly of working to heal the wounds of the brute, or bothering at all to try and save him from the results of his own stupidity. Does that answer you?"

Startled, Hughie eyed Doc warily.

"I guess so. Damned if I know what you're talking about, but yeah—it'll do!"

Doc swung his team to a halt in a little grove of creek alders and tethered it there. He tied his professional kit bag to the saddle of the spare mount Asbell had brought along. Both Asbell and Hughie Logan had digging tools slung to their saddles, while Asbell, in a tight roll behind the cantle, also had a couple of old blankets.

Doc climbed astride and they moved into the canyon. Almost at once they were in deep, chill shadow, where the clump of hoofs along the trail were but dim echoes against the splash and surge of hurrying waters foaming down a path of dripping ledges and spray-slicked boulders. For a time the trail held close to the creek, then it began to lift and climb until presently the voice of the creek's turbulence had dropped away until it was but a muted murmur.

They topped out on the canyon rim and moved along into the higher hill country, where morning sunlight fell in long,

hands and several instruments at the box spring then came over to the side of the forming grave.

Doe was soberly thoughtful. In answer to Asbell's questioning glance, he nodded.

"You were right all the way, Link. Paeky never felt the touch of the flames. He was dead, well before."

"Shot, maybe?" Asbell asked briefly.

Doe nodded again. "Through the head. And, judging by the destruction of bone and tissue, the bullet came out of a rifle."

Hughie Logan, all eyes and ears, mopped sweat from his face and looked at Asbell accusingly.

"Last night you didn't say anything about Paeky being shot. You kind of let it hang that maybe Paeky accidentally burned to death in that cabin."

"Last night," Asbell said, "I didn't know for sure just what had happened. I might have had a hunch, but I didn't want to say too much until I was sure."

"But we know, now!" Hughie exploded. "Somebody shot him. Who and why, for God's sake?"

Still for a moment, Asbell stared out across the clearing. He shrugged enigmatically.

"One guess is as good as another, I expect."

"Damn the guesses!" Hughie said. "You must have some idea?"

Asbell shrugged again. "Maybe, maybe not. Like I said—all a guess. Now let's get this thing done." He bent to his shovel again.

Later it was finished. All of it. The mortal remains of Paeky Lane, blanket wrapped, were laid carefully away, the grave filled and mounded over. Remained now only the fire scar with the blackened stove and iron bank to remind that this had once been human habitation: these and the small sprawled area of the pole corral. By the gate post of this Link Asbell indicated a spot about which the crowd had been again busy.

"Nothing attracts flies like ^{spice} ~~spice~~ was right here that Paeky went &

"Probably," Doc agreed. "The killer was lying in wait, out in the timber?"

Asbell spun up a cigarette, licked it into shape. "That's right. And after he dropped Packy he set out to cover up, to make it appear Packy had accidentally burned to death in the cabin. That was how I had it figured."

Hughie Logan spoke up. "What made you see it as something more than an accident?"

Asbell indicated the spot about which the green flies buzzed:

"This, for one thing. Then there was the fact that Packy's saddle wasn't in its usual place on the corral fence, or with the blanket arranged like Packy always left it. Finally, the timing was wrong, not the way Packy did things at this time of day."

"Let me get it all straight." Hughie said. "The killer hid out in the timber and downs Packy when the old feller comes from his daily swing. He unsaddles Packy's horse, hangs the riding gear on the fence, and puts the brone in the corral place. Is that it?"

"That's exactly it!" Asbell affirmed.

Hughie's glance ran all about the clearing, face hanging.

"Me, I'd sure like to come up with whoever pulled the trick. Packy Lane never did anybody a harm in his life, would anyone want to kill him?"

"Maybe," Asbell remarked slowly, "we'll know then and if we get to know the who. Well, we're doing and there's no point in hanging around."

They went back through the timber where morning fog warmth was beginning to render out a resinous fragrance. They reached the canyon rim and took the swift dropping trail. They moved out of sunlight into deep shadow where the solid voice and cool, moist breath of the creek waters came up to meet them. Presently they came again paralleling the brawling stream. Afterward

the canyon and rode the creek flats to where Doc's buckboard and team waited under the alders.

Doc dismounted with his kit bag. Asbell turned the lead rope of the horse Doc had ridden, over to Hughie Logan.

"See you later, cowboy. Right now I got places to go and people to talk to."

Hughie lingered, eyeing Asbell with some suspicion.

"You wouldn't be hunting more trouble, would you? If you are, then I better tag along. I don't mind you showing up with a black eye, but I'd hate to see you brought in across your saddle."

"I'm looking for advice, not trouble," Asbell assured. "You seatter along. And don't spread the word. Whoever did this thing, let them think they got us fooled."

"Fair enough," Hughie shrugged. "But don't you ride around day dreaming."

Hughie departed at a jog, heading homewards. Doc, having untied his team, climbed into the buckboard. Soberly he looked at Asbell.

"Link, there could be more than idle chatter in what Hughie just said."

"How's that?" Asbell asked.

Doe, thoughtfully frowning, located a pipe in his coat pocket, packed and lighted it before going on.

"Last night I did some thinking. On the way out here this morning I did more. That ruckus in the Imperial—the more I think on it the more convinced I am that Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson started the trouble deliberately. Now, knowing for certain what happened to Packy Lema last night's affair gets uglier by the minute. You might have come out of that ruckus a dead man."

"You notice," Asbell said drily. "that before I let go of Dalmar I took his gun away from him. I gambled either you or Whit Henderson or Ben Dillon would see that Bardo Sampson had no chance to use his. And what did"

Doc's frown became a hard speculative squint.

"With Mike Vincent gone, could it be they're out to stir up the old trouble, do you think?"

TOUGH SA
bell considered his answer carefully. Finally he
gged.
I only know that Mike's words will always be good enough
me, Doc. You know what he used to say. 'They do not like
and they never will' "

4

SOUTH, SOME two-thirds of the way from Rosebud Creek to where Burro Creek broke down out of the Saddleback Hills, Nels Madison's Running M range began. His flat land holdings was a strip along the base of the Saddlebacks, spreading some two miles into the plain and reaching south to a point almost due west of the town of Garrison, where the rugged, but passable slopes of the Saddlebacks merged with the sheer and virtually impassable ramparts of the Palisades.

It was good range, fed by several little water courses seeping from the hills. Aside from Burro Creek, these were too small in size to even warrant a name, though in total they represented valuable water. In addition, it was range which gave wide access to the high parks and meadows of the Saddlebacks, where cattle might thrive and fatten through the summer months when the flat country grass ran thin and the water holes were low and scant.

Headquarters of the Running M lay in a little meadow just south of Burro Creek and tucked in close to the hills. When Link Asbell rode up to the place, Mandy Madison, neat and crisp in starched gingham, was busy with a broom on the wide porch of the ranchhouse. Asbell swung his buckskin to a stop by the steps and touched his hat.

"Morning, Mrs. Madison. Where might I find that bull-voiced husband of yours?"

She paused in her chore, leaned folded arms on her broom and looked at him, gently smiling. There was a touch of Nez Perce Indian in Mandy Madison and it gave her a definite

charm. She was stalwart, fit mate for her big husband, hair black as night, her eyes the same, and doe soft, voice was slow and rich.

My, oh my—but aren't we formal and polite this fine mornin'! Well, Mister Asbell, if you must know, Nels and pe Hahn are down range somewhere, fixing our big Mericle ranch wagon. They were hauling corral post and rails yesterday afternoon and broke the reach—or something. Somethin' you want me to tell him?"

Asbell shook his head. "I'll hunt him up." He started to rein away, then changed his mind, quieting the buckskin. He hooked a knee about his saddle horn and got out tobacco and papers. While twisting up a smoke, he spoke with slow gravity.

"There's something you can tell me, Mandy. I got troubles. Most of them I got some idea how to handle. But there's one I'd sure appreciate some feminine advice on."

"Which would be about Sue?" guessed Mandy shrewdly. "That's right. You're just about her best friend and you know her better than anybody else. So maybe you can tell me what the devil's got into her? Sue Vincent is no fool. She's a damned intelligent girl, too intelligent, I would think, to go on acting the way she's doing."

"You mean, all this feverish running around in search of a good time?"

Asbell nodded. "It's like Hughie Logan says. Sue doesn't seem to care a lick for anything any more but a continuous round of whoop-de-do. But she's the owner of a big and mighty good ranch, Mandy, and it sure seems she'd be more concerned with the affairs of that than all this other em-hurrah."

The musing smile on Mandy Madison's lips remained. "There," she declared, "speaks the ever practical ranch business—always ranch business. Sue Vincent has nothing but that, all her life. And Link, a big ranch can't be virtual slaves of its people. To a man, this can be no slavery, for it represents challenge and achievement in every way of earning a living. For a girl, however, who

mother while very young and grew up surrounded by men. It could figure out a rougher life than you think. Oh, not in material things, necessarily, but in the gentler values which can be so dear to any woman's heart. When judging Sue Vincent, these things must be taken into consideration."

"Her father worshipped her," Asbell protested. "There wasn't anything Mike Vincent wouldn't do for her. And I—we—all the rest of us on Big Five—why, her slightest wish—"

"I know," Mandy Madison said. "To the best of your combined abilities, you all spoiled her to death. Despite that, Sue Vincent lived a great deal with loneliness. Of course Mike Vincent worshipped her and did everything he could for her. But Mike Vincent was a rough, tough old piece who might have understood the mind and heart of a boy, but never that of a girl. It was quite natural for Sue to yearn for some of the kind of social life she goes in for, now. She was like a spirited colt, free and eager to run."

"I can understand that," Asbell admitted. "But there are limits to all things. I go along with something that I can't say. Life can't be all fiesta."

"There was something else that Big Five did for Sue Vincent," Mandy Madison went on. "The way she was brought up to a girl like Sue, vibrant and full of life, that kind of life can mean a very great deal. In her loneliness, she needed anything else, I think, that is what she was something of."

"Maybe then," Asbell suggested, "that's why she was so nervous in his tone, 'that's why she was so nervous in his tone. Dalmar?'"

"Quite likely, and understandable. The fact that he is and the fact that he is a comfort, a refuge."

"But he's a Dalmar," Asbell said. "That's the cross him off."

"Why should it?"

"I said it the first time I saw him."

Mandy Madison's eyes were fixed on Asbell.

"Link, I know you're a Dalmar, but I don't know Mike Vincent's Dalmar."

g-headed in your own judgments. But are you sure you're not now letting some of Mike Vincent's old hates warp that judgment?"

"Frank Dalmar is a Dalmar," reiterated Asbell grimly. "Link Asbell, that's feudal thinking!" charged Mandy Madison spiritedly. "Just because their respective fathers put in a lifetime of snarling and growling and hating each other is no reason Sue and Frank should feel the same. I say it's their credit that they run around together. I see nothing wrong with Frank Dalmar. Would you have Sue live like a recluse, not to be seen or spoken to? Sue is a beautiful girl. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"Yes," said Asbell quietly. "I've noticed. It was so the first time I laid eyes on her, back when she was just a kid. She's always been—lovely—"

To herself, Mandy Madison murmured, "Ahl So that is how it is!" Her eyes softened with the thought. Aloud, "Have you ever told her so, Link?"

Color darkened the heavy bronze of Asbell's cheeks as he shook his head.

"That's small talk," he said gruffly. "I'm no hand at it."

"Small talk! Oh, you well-meaning, bumbling idiot. What have you ever told Sue Vincent?"

"Last night I told her Frank Dalmar was to stay off Big Five land from now on."

"Link Asbell—you didn't!" Mandy Madison's look was one of near horror. "You didn't actually say that to Sue?"

"I said it." Asbell swung his bent leg clear of the saddle horn, straightened up and sought the free stirrup with boot toe. "I mean it, too."

A little rock lizard had climbed up over the edge of the porch and Mandy made a fierce dab at it with her broom, sending the small intruder scurrying.

"Did I call you a bumbling idiot? All of that! Ten so—a hundred times! That you would say such to a girl as proud as Sue Vincent! I swear, was I in her place, I'd tell you this minute, Link Asbell! I've a notion to give you with this broom!"

A frown not far removed from a scowl furrowed Asbell's brow. He stubbed out the butt of his cigarette and his glance lay level and unwavering.

"Believe it or not, Mandy—I try and ride a balanced, reasonable trail in all things. Here and there along the way I see things. Now it could be that some of these things are imaginary, but I'm certain not all of them are. Some of them are real, more real than you dream. I was trying to make Sue understand that. Well, thanks for listening to me and giving me your opinion. As the old saying goes—your kindness is only exceeded by your good looks, proving to me that Nels Madison is one of this world's luckiest men. I'm going to look him up now and tell him so."

He touched his hat again, pulled the buckskin around and headed south at a reaching jog.

Mandy Madison watched him leave, then murmured soberly thoughtful words.

"You've a lot more on your mind, Link Asbell, than just the why and wherefore of Sue Vincent's caperings. And you've set the Indian in me to seeing shadows on a fine morning where there should be none!"

She moved along the ranchhouse porch, wielding her broom with a quick, determined vigor, as though she would sweep all such shadows, fancied or real, into nothingness.

Well toward the southern end of Running M ground, Asbell found Nels Madison and Rupe Hahn at work on the heavy Merivale ranch wagon. Rupe was flat on his back under the big rig and Nels down on hands and knees beside it, offering tools and advice. Pulled up nearby, with a harnessed team for the Merivale at lead, was the Running M buckboard.

At Link Asbell's approach, Nels Madison looked up, pushed his hat to the back of his head, mopped sweat from his face and brow and made rumbling, good-natured comment.

"Wish I was riding boss of a big, fat ranch with nothing to do but drift around looking wise and prosperous on a fine fresh day. My friend, howdy! Just as I

carry something on your mind so important you want to unload it?"

Asbell stepped down, ground-reined the buckskin, then squatted on his heels.

"Something on my mind, all right, Nels," he admitted. "I'll let you be the judge of its importance."

"Could it have anything to do with that mournful eye you're sporting?" grinned Nels, reaching over to claim Asbell's sack of Durham.

"The eye ties in with some of it," Asbell nodded. "That will come later. But now, here's the first part."

He told of Packy Lane and the burned line cabin. The good-natured ease faded from Nels Madison's broad face and a pull of grimness thinned his lips.

"Now God damn such business!" he exploded. "Link, you're certain Packy had been shot?"

"Plumb! Doc Jerome knows plenty about such things. And it's his professional word that Packy Lane was shot through the head with a rifle slug."

"After which the cabin was burned in an effort to cover up?"

"No doubt of it. But the cabin was too old and flimsy to make a fire hot enough to consume everything. It left enough of Packy for Doc to make certain of his findings."

Nels spat, as though nauseated.

"Some damned two-legged ghou! must be loose in the hills. Would the idea have been robbery, maybe?"

Asbell shook his head.

"Doubt it. Nothing to rob, for Packy never bothered to draw wages while holding down the line camp through the summer. He just let his time stack up in the book. I doubt he had four-bits in his jeans when he was killed."

Rupe Hahn came slithering out from under the Meriyale. He was a steady, methodical sort, generally given to minding his own affairs and keeping his opinions to himself. Just now, however, his eyes were hard and bright with a quick burning anger.

"Me," he said bluntly, "I never figured to ever want any

part of a lynching, but should you round up who pulled that trick, Link, I'll be happy to help haul on the rope!"

Nels Madison pounded a clenched fist into the open palm of his other hand.

"But why—why would anybody want to murder a harmless old fellow like Packy? It's so damn pointless it don't make sense."

"Maybe it doesn't," Asbell said, bleakness creeping into his tone. "Then again—maybe it does!"

Nels Madison stared at him, glance quick and boring.

"If there's more, let's have it!"

Asbell told of the ruckus in the Imperial. Again Nels stared, frowning.

"Maybe I'm thick-headed this morning. But what's the fact that you larruped Sage Wingo in Ben Dillon's bar got to do with Packy Lane being killed, back in the hills?"

"Packy," Asbell pointed out tersely, "was part of Big Five. I'm part of Big Five. And the row in the Imperial wasn't just a casual thing. It was a pot of trouble deliberately stirred up by Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson. Not because they figured Sage Wingo could or would give me a physical going-over, for, while I'm in no way bragging, I think it should be pretty apparent to anyone that I'd be able to take care of myself against Wingo. No, I doubt Dalmar and Sampson would figure so. But they could have figured that somewhere during the tangle a shot might be fired and the man ending up on the floor be me!"

Nels Madison drew a deep inhale on the cigarette he'd pun up and lighted.

"You realize what you're saying, Link?"

"I know exactly what I'm saying," was Asbell's quick retort.

He waved an encompassing hand, indicating the upreared alk of the Saddleback Hills, now beginning to blur in outline under a haze as soft and luring and blue as smoke.

"What's up there, Nels? Range, man—summer range! Grass in the parks and meadows, water in the draws. What title on that range? Running M and B—"

40
Diamond. Mark that point. No Dalmar and Sampson stuff.
Why not? Look!"

Asbell spun on his heels and pointed again.
"There the Saddlebaeks leave off and the Palisades begin. How are you going to get cattle over that Palisade Rim? You're not. Neither is anybody else, including Dalmar and Sampson. So, no Double Diamond stock gets past the Palisades. And no Double Diamond stock can get into the Saddlebaeks further north unless across Running M or Big Five range. Which you're not allowing and I'm not allowing. Which leaves Dalmar and Sampson—where? Why, hungry as wolves for summer range and no way to get it. Unless—" "Unless—what?" demanded Nels Madison harshly. "Unless something happens to Big Five, or to Running M—or to both!"

Nels Madison stared straight ahead, little knots of muscle balling at the corners of his jaw. The harshness of his tone deepened.

"I don't believe a word you're saying—but keep on!" "You mean you don't want to believe it," Asbell charged. "Well, I don't want to believe it, either. But if you got a better answer, let's hear it."

Nels shook his head, saying nothing. Now Rupe Hahn prised again.

"Makes sense to me—what Link says. There's damn sweetness and light in either Jonas Dalmar or Bardo Sampson. Bardo, he's like some knot-headed bull critter, not who or what he tramples down. Jonas Dalmar, he's just mean, but in a different, sly sort of way. Always sneers, a sarcastic one, like he finds pleasure in throwing rawhide at everybody else. I tell you I wouldn't trust him or Bardo as far as I can spit, which ain't any ground of a ways."

"I think you're both loco," Nels Madison declared with no great amount of conviction.

"Twenty-four hours ago," Asbell said pointedly, "had a rider and a line camp up in the Saddlebaeks, so keep an eye on its share of that summer range I

tioned. Now the rider is dead and the line camp burned. What's that mean to you, Nels?"

Nels got to his feet and stamped around, a big, kindly, friendly man, wanting to believe nothing but the best of everyone. He swung his head and shoulders from side to side like a badgered bear.

"Damn you, Link Asbell! Here, just a little bit ago I was seeing it as a fine day. Now—! Man—you're guessing at all this!"

Asbell gave grim retort.

"I'm not guessing that Packy Lane is dead and the line camp burned. No guess there—that's fact! And I'm not guessing that Dalmar and Sampson went out of their way to start trouble with me. The hell I'm guessing, Nels! You know I'm not."

"What do you want me to do?" Nels protested. "What can I do? What can you do?"

Asbell straightened up and climbed back into his saddle. His gaze probed the upsweep of the hills, drowsy in the sun. He spoke with sober emphasis.

"Mark this, Nels. If what I figure is shaping up turns out to be a fact, then Running M is in line for trouble, same as Big Five. For the same reason and from the same source. So keep your eyes open and do your riding up-wind. Now I'll leave you to your fixing chore. Or do you need extra help?"

Nels shook his head.

"Heavy part of the job is done. Just a few bolts to set and nuts to tighten up. And, Link—I'm not as big a damn fool as I sometimes appear. I'll be looking and listening and if I run across anything crawling in the weeds, I'll sure let you know."

Asbell's smile was quick and faintly grim. "Fair enough. And any time I'm not around to hand out advice, you can listen to Rupe, here. Nobody's stopping him and wasting money."

Saying so, he set the buckskin's head toward home.

Within half an hour after Asbell left the team repair job was done. The team brought it to a halt behind the

board was hitched to the Merivale and Rupe Hahn climbed to the seat of the big wagon. Nels Madison moved over to the buckboard, paused there.

"I'll go on ahead and check our measurements again, Rupe. You'll have to take the long way around."

Nodding, Rupe kicked off the brake and clucked to his team and the big wagon creaked into movement. Nels, after loading several tools in the buckboard, cut away with it at an angle toward the base of the Saddlebacks. He had no worries at taking the light, agile buckboard across a stretch of ditch and wash-cut range he would not chance with the heavily loaded Merivale.

Ahead lay the chore of building a corral and branding chute near the southern end of Running M range, which, when done would save much time and work in hazing cattle up and down the miles. This project, up until Link Asbell appeared, had filled all of Nels Madison's mind. Now, however, most thought of it had been pushed aside by the disclosures Asbell had made, along with the insistent implications lying behind them.

Guiding his team instinctively, rolling his big shoulders in balance to the pitch and weave of the buckboard, Nels Madison somberly considered these implications. They suggested something a man hated to recognize, yet had to admit the possibility of. And this possibility and what it could lead to, made for thoughts that were dark and worrisome.

The spot selected for the branding corral and chute was just off the mouth of a small gulch funneling out of the hill slope. Reaching here, Nels pulled up, set the brake, dropped out of the buckboard and began pacing off the roughly staked layout of the corral. At the western end of this he paused, his glance speculating as he tried to calculate the amount of rails and posts on the way in the Merivale against the distance to be covered. Standing so, the broad of his back and shoulders was turned to the hill slope.

At the mouth of the gulch there was a small, furtive movement, and the glint of sunlight on gun metal. Right after, came the hard, thin lancing smash of rifle report.

An invisible, but potent force knocked Nels Madison off his feet, drove him face down on the earth where he lay, stupefied, held with vague wonder as to what had happened. All he was certain of was that he'd been struck a savagely heavy blow, and that there was a great sense of shock and a growing numbness flooding all through him. Also, things were slipping away from him, while at the far, far edge of a dimming world, the echoes of a gunshot were running out into nothingness.

Startled by the shot, the buckboard team whirled until the combined tension of a cramped wheel and the locked brake formed a pull sufficiently to halt their swing. They stopped snorting and stamping nervously, heads tossing.

Far out in the flat, Rupe Hahn caught the thin snarl of the rifle shot, and he sat high on the seat of the Merivale, looking and wondering.

HUNGER RODE INTO town with Link Asbell, s Andy Bleeker's grill and got outside a good st toes, bread and butter and a generous wedge pic, all washed down with two cups of coffe

Back on Center Street again he paused l build and light a cigarette, then tramped alon derson's store. Here he found Whit perched on counter, taking on a frugal lunch of crackers a a can of air-tights from his own shelf. The stor a welcoming hand.

"Help yourself."

Asbell shook his head.

"Thanks, Whit—I just ate at Andy Bleeker's. thanks again for helping out last night. You left a chance to say it then. So I'm saying it now."

Whit Henderson grinned.

"My friend, it was a pleasure. More than onc take some rough talk from Bardo Sampson. So satisfaction in making him be good with his ow admit I thoroughly enjoyed seeing both him an mar on the floor. Both of them had it coming."

Asbell considered for a sober moment, his down. Then:

"After a night's sleep, Whit, and from here, opinion of that affair? Was there more to it th the surface, or, in thinking there was, am I lettin nation run away with me?"

Henderson's answer was quick and positive.

"If you mean did Dalmar and Sampson—Dalmar in particular—set out to scrub up trouble, I say yes, definitely! Bardo Sampson, well, he might have been nasty merely because he'd backed several losing hands during the evening, for he's thick-headed at poker as well as being a poor sport. On the other hand, Jonas Dalmar—now there's a man who never made a move in his life without some previously figured purpose behind it. Even in a low limit, table stakes game among friends he'll sit there, cold and sarcastic and sardonic, calculating every move and all the odds. There's a man, Link, whose sole purpose in life is to win, to be top dog, no matter what he has to do to get there."

"Obliged for the opinion," Asbell said. "I wanted to be sure I wasn't jumping at conclusions. A man's got to watch that his personal opinions don't sway his judgment out of balance."

"You're wondering, of course," deduced Whit Henderson shrewdly, "whether your trouble last night is somehow connected with the killing of Paeky Lane?"

Asbell, about to take a short turn up and down in front of the counter, came around quickly.

"Doe Jerome tell you about Paeky?"

Henderson nodded. "He stopped in on his way back from Rosebud Creek. Bad business, Link."

"All of that." Asbell scrubbed a restless hand across his chin. "You know, Whit—if Big Five were mine, a lot of decisions would be a hell of a lot easier to make. As it is, I got to look after Big Five affairs, and, while seeing that nobody takes advantage of us, still keep my feet on the ground and the ranch out of trouble. It sort of leaves a man not knowing which way to turn."

"I know," Henderson said sympathetically. "The last thing you want in the world is to get mixed up in any kind of trouble that might endanger the future of Big Five, which would also mean that of Sue Vincent. Old Mike Vincent left you with a lot of responsibilities, didn't he?"

"Some," Asbell admitted. "I don't mind that part, though. The tough angle is not knowing quite where you

ER RODE INTO town with Link Asbell, so he stopped at Bleeker's grill and got outside a good steak, fried potatoes, bread and butter and a generous wedge of dried apple all washed down with two cups of coffee. Back on Center Street again he paused long enough to hold and light a cigarette, then tramped along to Whit Henderson's store. Here he found Whit perched on one end of the counter, taking on a frugal lunch of crackers and cheese and a can of air-tights from his own shelf. The storekeeper waved a welcoming hand.

"Help yourself."

Asbell shook his head.

"Thanks, Whit—I just ate at Andy Bleeker's. And, Whit—thanks again for helping out last night. You left before I had a chance to say it then. So I'm saying it now."

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"My friend, it was a pleasure. More than once I've had to take some rough talk from Bardo Sampson. So I got a lot of satisfaction in making him be good with his own gun. I must admit I thoroughly enjoyed seeing both him and Jonas Dalmar on the floor. Both of them had it coming."

Asbell considered for a sober moment, his eyes pinched down. Then:

"After a night's sleep, Whit, and from here, what's your opinion of that affair? Was there more to it than showed on the surface, or, in thinking there was, am I letting my imagination run away with me?"

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"Some," Asbell admitted. "I don't mind that part, though. The tough angle is not knowing quite where you stand or

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might be facing you. Or how far you dare go in stomping out trouble."

"These," declared Whit Henderson thoughtfully, "are eggs which only time will provide the answer to. It's like s, Link. Either your trouble last night and the killing ofucky Lane are tied together, or they're not. If not, probably there's the end of it. For Dalmar and Sampson and Sage Vingo certainly found out that you were a good man to leave alone. On the other hand, if there is a connection, some further move is sure to be made, to prove a definite plan and purpose at work. So, presently, you'll know exactly where you stand and where Big Five stands. And when you know that, you'll also know what you have to do."

A step sounded at the door and a man was framed there. A small drift of air seeping in, brought with it the aroma of expensive cigar smoke. Pausing for a moment while his eyes adjusted from bright sunlight to warm shadow, Charley Tunison came on into the store.

The lawyer was a well set-up and well-preserved man, though the somewhat florid coloring in his carefully barbered cheeks suggested an overfondness for good food and good whiskey. His hair, slightly curly, was shot with gray, his eyes carried a suggestion of staring hardness which made his easy smile seem more mechanical than natural, as though were something he could turn on or off as the need of the moment dictated. Just now it was on. He took his cigar in his lips and waved it lightly.

"Link—Whit—how are you?"
Before either could answer, he put further words in the storekeeper's ear.

"You order up those cigars for me, Whit?"
"Order went off on Friday's stage," Henderson answered.
"Don't tell me you're running short? If you are, Charley, got a few boxes of another brand."
The lawyer snorted with brusk sarcasm.
"Cabbage. All other brands are first-grade cabbage."

TOUGH

ut to say more, Asbell instead cocked his head and
ed intently:
rying in from the street came the hard pound of fast
ing hoofs. A buckboard, carrying a single occupant,
pped past the open door. Asbell stiffened, exclaiming.
That's Rupe Hahn! Why would he be in such a hurry?"
spurred by vague foreboding he ran outside in time to see
e speeding buckboard make a skidding, dust-scattering turn
om Center into Cross Street. There was no doubt of Rupe
ahn's urgency, or of his destination. At Asbell's elbow, Whit
Henderson named it.

"He's after Doc Jeromel"
Asbell had left his buckskin at the rail of Andy Bleeker's
eating house. He hurried to it, loosed the rein tie and swung
into the saddle. He spun the horse away from the rail and
lifted it to a run.

Three doors from the corner of Center and Cross streets
was the office of Charley Tunnison. The lawyer stood in front
of it, about to enter. He stared at Asbell as the latter sped by,
and, after Asbell made the turn into Cross, remained as he
was for a little time, motionless. Then he wheeled and went
into his office, his mechanical smile reflecting the ghost of a
sardonic mockery.

The Running M buckboard with its sweating, blowing team
was pulled up in front of Doc Jerome's cottage. Asbell hauled
the buckskin in beside the rig and waited so, not sure whether
he should follow Rupe, or wait for him to come out of the
house. Rupe solved this indecision by emerging at a run,
followed by Doc Jerome. Doc, carrying his bag, was still try-

to shrug into his half-donned coat.
"What is it, Rupe?" Asbell demanded.
"Nels!" came the harsh, strained answer. Rupe caught
his reins and poised his whip. "Some dirty bastard try
him!"

Asbell flinched. "How bad is it?"
"He was still alive when I headed here. Past that
know. Come on, Doc!"
Doc Jerome scrambled in beside Rupe, calling to

"Link, bring my rig out to Running M. I—!"

Whatever else Doc said was drowned out by the squeal of an iron tire against an iron fender as Rupe kicked off the brake, poured the whip to his team and brought the buckboard around in a violent, cramped, tilting turn. By the time he reached Center Street and made the corner, Rupe had his team flattened out into a full run.

Jigger Henley's freight and stage corrals and his livery barn stood at the southern end of Center Street. Henley, rail thin and laconic, was building a new oat bin, and as Asbell rode into the stable runway, Henley's hammer was beating out a sharp roll of echoes. At Asbell's curt request he put his hammer aside and began reaching down harness from a wall peg.

In short minutes the stable owner had Doc's team and buckboard ready, but it was not until he turned the reins over to Asbell that he voiced his curiosity.

"Where to?"

"Running M," Asbell said.

"Somebody sick?"

"Somebody hurt. Nels Madison. He's been shot—dry-gulched!"

"The hell you say!" Jigger Henley was jarred out of his usual frugality of words. "Old Nels—he's not dead!"

"He wasn't when Rupe Hahn came after Doc Jerome. I don't know anything more than that."

"The hell!" swore Jigger again. "Why old Nels—he's just about the best-natured, best-hearted man I know."

Asbell left town at a steady trot, his buckskin at lead behind the buckboard. There was no need of any extreme hurry, for he could do nothing of account at Running M. Doc was the one who counted out there, now. Good old Doc! Keen, tireless and dedicated to the principles of mercy and the preservation of life. While others slunk through the hills like furtive animals and shot better men in the back.

When Asbell drove up to Running M. Pearly Grimes were rubbing down and

TOUGH

had driven so furiously. Asbell went over to them, the question in his eyes. Rupe answered it.

till alive. Doc's going after the bullet now. Said he had et it if Nels was to have a chance. Run me out. Mandy, s in there helping. That Mandyl Link, she's—she's—by d, she's wonderfull" Rupe's words ran husky as he finished. "She's all of that," Asbell agreed. "Rupe, where and how d it happen?"

Rupe sketched things briefly. "I'm taking the long way round with the Merivale like Nels told me to," he began. "I hear this shot. I wondered some about it, but not too much Nels, he keeps a carbine in the buckboard when he's up and down the range on the chance of seeing a wolf down out of the Saddlebacks. I figure maybe he'd got a shot at one."

"That's all I heard. When I got there, Nels he's sprawled out, flat and still, his shirt all red and soggy. I figure for sure, he's dead. When I found he wasn't, I tied him up best I could and brought him in. I don't know yet how I got him into the back of the buckboard by myself, for he's a plenty big man. Guess I made it just because I had to. Mandy, she helped me jack him into the house. Then she tells me to skin for tow after Doc Jerome. She was that cool and steady and quick you just could hardly believe it, Link. I'm telling you, that Mandy Madison—!"

Rupe's words trailed off, lost in voiceless admiration. "Out where it happened," Asbell probed, "did you see sign of anybody around?"

Rupe shook his head.

"When I got there, everything was quiet. It's pretty country. About the only place anybody could have hid in a little gulch that breaks out of the hills, close by didn't stop to look for sign there or anywhere else. All think of was to get Nels home. Pearly here, he w brought in the big wagon and team. He didn't see anybody, either."

Rupe hesitated for a moment, then went on to ask

"You think this maybe ties in with what we were talkin' about, Link—you and Nels and me?"

"If it doesn't," Asbell answered grimly, "what else makes sense?"

Pearly Grimes, gnarled and leathery, dug a battered chunk of plug tobacco from a pocket, scrubbed it against a shirt sleeve to rid it of the worst of the lint and dust, gnawed off a morsel and rolled it in one wrinkled cheek.

"Me," he said, with measured emphasis, "I been around considerable longer than either of you fellers, and I've seen it happen before. It always starts the same way."

Asbell looked at the old rider.

"What does, Pearly?"

"A big steal," Pearly said. "Any time good men start bein' gulched, it means somebody else is figgerin' on a big steal!"

Refolding a piece of burlap sacking to get a fresh side to work with, Pearly resumed his chore of rubbing down a weary buckboard team.

Link Asbell turned and looked across at the ranchhouse, the darkness of his mood deepening. Yonder, within those quiet walls, Nels Madison lay. Big, good-natured Nels who liked to believe the best of everybody. But now, perhaps dead or dying. At best, making a desperate fight for life. With Mandy close beside him, fighting twice as desperately as he for that life in her man.

Last night, on his way home from town, and riding all the way on one side of the road, he had listened to Nels's snoring and infectious laughter as Nels and Mandy came past in the midnight dark. Two great people, Nels and Mandy Madison, who always got so much good laughter and cheer out of life together.

But now a skulking killer's bullet had struck at their very no eager laughter or cheer. Instead, just the same, in the day, wrenching grief which lay beyond the passing years of pain.

Whipped by his thoughts, the son of a wealthy, powerful ruthlessness took increasing grip on the reins.

They waited it out in wooden chairs, he and Mandy Madison and Pearly Grimes, and every minute of the day from then

TOUGHER!
n itself, and the hour an eternity. At long last Doc
e showed on the ranchhouse porch, rolling down his
s. He beckoned them over.
got the slug," he said simply. "I never had to go deeper
a man to get one—but I got it! Which gives Nels his
nce, now."

How big a chance, Doc?" Asbell asked.
Doc held out his hand, tipped it one way, then the other.
"About so. But Nels is a big brute and a strong one. Also,
's got Mandy on his side, which gives him an edge. At a
me like this, such a woman can take the devil apart with her
are hands."

Rupe Hahn repeated himself. "Mandy—she's wonderful—!"
"Yes," agreed Doc. "Not a quiver, not a shake. You have
to look deep to recognize the dread, the hurt in her eyes.
Rupe, you might as well put up my team, for I'll be staying
the night. Then either you or Pearly will have to make an-
other trip to town to pick up some items I'll need. I'll give
you a list. Addie will get the stuff together for you at the
office."

"What about me, Doc?" Asbell suggested. "What can I
do?"

"Mainly, hold the good thought. Also, it can mean a great
deal to any woman in her moment of strain and worry if
another of her own sex is close at hand. Mandy Madison and
Sue Vincent have always been pretty close. If Sue was to ride
over and stay for a day or two about now, it would help a lot."

"I'll see to that, Doc," Asbell promised. "Anything else
Doc stood silent for a moment, watching Rupe Hahn and
Pearly Grimes cross to the corrals. Then when he spoke, it
in slow and somberly thoughtful words.

"Yes, Link—something else. You be careful. You be dan-
carefull For, whether we like it or not, there's a pattern
ginning to shape up—a damned ugly pattern. Yes, you
carefull"

Heading homeward, Asbell was startled to see how m-
the day had slipped away. The sun was well over
shoulder and settling toward the Saddleback Hills. Co-

ing time and events, he found it hard to realize all that had taken place in the short space of a scant twenty-four hours.

At this time yesterday, all he had to be concerned with was the everyday business of ranch affairs, with no particular problem to fret over. Now, one good man, Packy Lane was dead, and another, Nels Madison lay dangerously wounded, and there was grim shadow suddenly across the earth.

Be careful, Doc Jerome had warned. Be damned careful! Because, Doc said, there was a pattern shaping up, an ugly one. In effect, Whit Henderson had said the same thing. So had Pearly Grimes. Oldtimers, all three of them, long on the plain. Oldtimers who well knew the pulse of this range, past and present, apparent and hidden. Just as they knew all the purposes and cross-purposes of men who had been, and of men who still were.

Asbell stood in his stirrups, swung his head restlessly. So far as he could see there was nothing moving at the moment except a couple of dust devils kicked up by the late afternoon wind that had begun to funnel down out of the Saccharnocks. Afterwards, however, when Big Five headquarters lit ahead, ranchhouse shining whitely in the sun's long light, a pair of riders jogged in from the north and pulled up in front of the place.

Sue Vineent and Frank Dalmar. Asbell's eyes dimmed as he cut over to face them, his mood harsh and unresponsive.

Other than a difference in years, Frank Dalmar was a replica of his father, youthfully lean where old Link was gaunt. He had the same black hair and eyes, the same cast of feature. But where his father's looked sardonic, derisive, Frank's tended more toward the suspicion of an only partially covered conceit. The look of suspicion was there now as he tried to meet and hold Link's searching glance, but in this he encountered an impact which made him uneasy in his saddle.

Sue Vineent did not miss the hostility in Asbell's look and manner, either, and she spoke up quickly as if to say something she was fearful of.

"What is it, Link? You've something to tell me?"

Asbell's nod was curt.

"Something to tell both you—and Dalmar. Dalmar first. Starting now, he gets off Big Five land and he stays off! I catch him on any part of it again, I run hell out of him with a quirt. You hear me, Dalmar? Get off and stay off!"

At first, Frank Dalmar's expression was one of startled ineredulity. Then dark color washed up his narrow cheeks and his lips pulled thin.

"That's erazy talk, Asbell," he retorted. "You must have lost your senses!"

"Wrong!" Asbell rapped. "I've just come to them."

For a moment, Sue Vincent also seemed unable to believe her ears. Then, flaring hotly, she lashed at Asbell with blazing glance and furious words.

"Don't you dare threaten a friend of mine this way! Link Asbell, just what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I gave you the same word last night. Dalmar gets off Big Five land and he stays off!"

She faced up to him, her head back, her slim shoulders squared, all seething indignance, all quivering anger. Twin spots of color blazed high in her cheeks and there were little, pale cavities at the corners of her nostrils. Her voice ran repressed, husky with feeling.

"Link, you've been on this ranch a long time. My father believed in you and trusted you as he trusted no other. I—I've believed in you and trusted you, too. But if you persist in this blind, ridiculous antagonism Dad passed along to you, then you'll simply have to leave. You can't stay on at Big Five, feeling and acting as you do. What you just said to Frank is almost unforgivable. You'll apologize now—and fully! Or—or you can go roll your gear and I'll make out your time!"

Under the storm of her words, Asbell's face became an impassive mask, devoid of any expression save a settled bleakness. His glance was steady, unwavering.

"There'll be no apology. Firing me won't help matters, either. I'll still run him off Big Five land. Sue, there's a lot you don't know."

Her reply came in something not far from a tight whisper.

"I know this. I know that you assume too much. So you cannot stay another hour on this ranch. Get your gear together. Your time will be waiting for you on the other side."

Frank Dalmar laughed thinly.

"Good girl! That cuts him down to size."

Asbell threw him a quick glance.

"I'll still be too big for you, Dalmar! You had your warning and you should have listened to it. I'll get around to you in a minute." He turned back to Sue Vincent. "The young men believe you don't quite mean all of that. Sue, for instance, here's something for you to hear, first. No accident in the cause killed Paaky Lane. Paaky was murdered—shot through the head. Doc Jerome established that point this morning and has sworn to it by affidavit. Which isn't all."

"Right now, Doc is at the Running M. Spinning in a wheel of life. He asked me to bring this message to you. Then you get over there right away, prepared to stay a while. Mandy, Mandy needs help and comfort."

Startled past her immediate anger, Sue Vincent rushed to him.

"Mandy—needs help and comfort. Right?"

"Because her man has been shot. Somebody told me that Nels. No, he's not dead. At least he wasn't when I left the Running M a little while ago. But there's no chance he won't be had wounded the way he is. Mandy's been worried about it, but a spell of tears would do her good and she needs a friend's comforting shoulder. Yours."

Sue's look went past Asbell, seeing nothing but a warning else immediately around. For all her strength she went inward, weighing the ominous significance of the look given her. She drew a deep breath and said:

"Mandy—oh, Mandy—!"

In one lithe twist she was out of the room, through the patio entrance and running for the farmhouse door.

Link Asbell returned his cold regard to Frank Dalmar.

"Out of respect for Sue's feelings and for no other reason you get this chance to ride off Big Five land. But after you do, you stay off! Or do you feel like arguing the point?"

For a little time it seemed Frank Dalmar might dare that very thing. Then he shrugged and lifted his reins.

"I didn't shoot anybody, Asbell, so I'm damned if I know why you're so hostile all of a sudden. Not that I care, particularly. Every man to his own preference, and I don't like you any better than you like me. Past all that, there can always be another time, and another place."

"Any time—any place!" Asbell invited curtly.

Frank Dalmar did not reply, but turned his horse and lifted to a lope, heading south.

SOUTH AND WEST of town, some eight miles out in the flat, dry run of the plain, Double Diamond headquarters sprawled its corrals and ranch buildings about a single tall windmill tower. It was strictly a male lair. The ranchhouse was unpainted and on the warped, badly scuffed porch a couple of saddles were thrown carelessly down. Three round-backed chairs, padded with old gunny sacks, were scattered along the porch, with a fourth sagging drunkenly on three legs. A battered claw hammer and a little pile of rusty, old-fashioned nails were stacked against the wall. Finally, there was a pair of run-over boots that at some time had got water soaked and then allowed to dry too long in the sun, and now were warped and cracked and iron-hard and useless.

Things were no different inside, where a barren cheerlessness held the rooms. In one of these Frank Dalmar found his father across a rough, pine-wood table that was littered with old papers and magazines and two lard-pat tins packed full of cigar and cigarette butts and dead ashes. Also there was a box of pistol ammunition, broken open on one side and with several of the fat, brass cartridges spilling out. Taped information on the box designated these cartridges as being of Colt, loaded with a 255 grain bullet and of grade of best grade Ffg black powder.

Jonas Dalmar fixed his son with a narrowed stare.

"Another day of loafing, eh? Visiting with the Indians and I suppose. When in hell are you going to undertake the job is a cattle ranch where all grown men are supposed to work and earn their salt?"

Frank Dalmar reddened under his father's scathing glance and words. Always it had been like this. Over the years there had been so little kindness from this man, and so much that derisive sarcasm. Frank's retort was curt.

"The day I'm allowed a little real authority around this layout, I'll take hold and show you plenty! But damned if I'm going to stand being bossed by such as Bardo Sampson or Sage Wingo."

"Then why don't you tell them so—and make it stick!" shot back his father. "Instead you come whining to me like you were helpless or broken hearted or some damned thing!"

Frank reddened again. "What is this place—a jungle? Does the son of the main owner have to fight everybody on it to show his right to a little authority?"

Jonas Dalmar rolled his half-smoked cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, ground his teeth down on it while the derision in his glance grew.

"He has to prove himself a man to me. He's got to be able to knock somebody down and walk over them. So far I ain't seen any sign of him doing it. He's too busy lally-gagging around a girl who's turning him into a lazy, lick-spittle bum. And, God—how I hate that!"

Cornered anger climbed up in Frank, and he hit out with sarcasm of his own.

"On that basis you must rate Link Asbell as a very hell a man. For I hear he knocked you and Bardo Sampson and Sage Wingo down and walked all over the three of you!"

The lighted end of Jonas Dalmar's cigar fell to the floor as the butt was bitten cleanly through in a quick, convulsive surge of reawakened anger. Now that he had started, Frank said more.

"I heard other things, too, like somebody shooting Packy Lane, who was riding line for Big Five up on Ro Creek. And then tried to cover up by burning the old in the cabin. But Doc Jerome worked on what was Lane and has sworn out an affidavit that Lane had been And there is more. Somebody tried to gulch Nels M. He's not dead, but he's bad wounded."

TOUGH

...ybe I will!"

...at I tell you to do. You may talk tough, but I know. All you've ever been is a lot of front, held up by name and my money. And I know why you've been hanging around that Vincent girl so much. You'd like to talk her into marrying you, not so much for herself, but to get your hands on Big Five. And wouldn't that be something! Such a nice easy way to get hold of a fine ranch. Marry it!"

Jonas Dalmar paused, his narrow cheeks caving inward as he took another deep pull at his cigar.

"Yeah, a fine scheme, but one that would never have worked. For two reasons. First, giddy as she might act some times, Sue Vincent is no complete fool. Second, I'd see you dead before I'd stand for you marrying a Vincent, even if by doing so you brought along a whole county."

Jonas Dalmar moved to the door of the room, paused there, and spoke again with a staccato harshness.

"Wipe that God-have-mercy-on-us look off your face! If your guts are turning over it's not from scruple or regret, but because you're scared—plain damned scared, and because what's in the wind definitely finishes any chance you ever had of marrying Big Five, even if I'd stood for it."

"Oh, I want Big Five, all right—and I mean to have it! But I'll take it in my own way, the rough, mean way that make that old bastard, Mike Vincent, writhe in his grave. And you're going right along with me if I have to boot you every foot of the way. So let's have no more of that wounded honor pose. It don't fool me worth a damn!"

Jonas Dalmar left the room, shutting the door solidly behind him.

Frank Dalmar stared at the closed door. Here at last, the thing he had always sensed in his father, was in the flesh. A relentless purpose and cruelty that was the dark foundation of all the derisive sneers, the sarcasm, the cutting words. Yes, here was the cruelest of purposes, utterly without scruple of any sort.

What made a man that way? Greed, perhaps? I

power, or perverted ambition? Any one or all of these. But mainly because a human being, it seemed, could be born with all the rapacious instincts of a wolf.

What of himself? Words his father had thrown at him still rang in his ears. "If your guts are turning over, it's because you're scared—" Well, they were turning over, all right, and was it, or was it not from fear? If so—fear of what?

Frank Dalmar moved out into a short hall that was filled with the thickening gloom of dusk and the musty staleness of warm, trapped air. At the far end of this he turned into a room that was his own, and lowered himself on the edge of an iron bunk on which a couple of blankets lay in an untidy tangle.

For some little time he was motionless, his eyes fixed straight ahead, as though seeking a cleared way through the debris of ominous fact which had fallen all about him. When he finally did move it was to drag a warbag from under the bunk. From this he unearthed a partially emptied pint flask of whiskey. He waggled the cork free and took a long drag. The bite of the liquor, running rich and raw down his throat in such potent amount, made him cough, made his eyes water, and he rubbed the back of his free hand across them.

Hitting his empty stomach, the whiskey was swift in its effect. He felt better. The queasiness he had known at his father's blunt disclosures was burned away by the whiskey's invigorating warmth. He took a second drag. And presently a third, which emptied the flask.

Dusk deepened to darkness. Faintly came all the little sounds of the ranch marking off another day and meeting another night. Loudest of these was the jangling of the iron triangle at the cookshack door as the cook beat out the call to supper.

Frank Dalmar considered the fact of food and decided he didn't want any. What he wanted right now was more whiskey. He threw the empty flask across the room where it broke with sharp impact in a far corner.

He got to his feet and made his way out of the house in night's full dark. Light shone in the cookshack and the valley

of the open doorway was momentarily filled with the bulk of two late arrivals. Jonas Dalmar and Bardo and the Double Diamond crew were now gathered there. A drift of air brought to Frank's nostrils the good fragrance of frying steak, but he paid it no account. It was his goal. He crossed to the cavy corral, moving as he considered care of the partially drunk, caught and released and rode out along the town trail into the darkness.

By the time he pulled up in front of Ben Dillon's Imperial, the first lift of the whiskey he'd taken on was dying out. He was physically shaky and hag-ridden with dark and tangled fears. There was a slight weave in his stride as he dashed through the Imperial door, came up to the bar and dumped a handful of mixed coins in front of him.

It was still a little early for the after supper trade to show up, or the evening card games to start, and Ben Dillon was alone in the place. Wise in the ways of men with their liquor, he recognized Frank Dalmar's need and put bottle and glass in front of him.

"Evening, Frank."

Frank Dalmar's answer was merely a grunt and he slopped some whiskey on the bar in his eagerness to fill his glass. He put the drink away in one avid gulp and quickly poured himself another.

Shrewdly reading the signs and recognizing them, Ben Dillon moved further down the bar and took up the mechanical chore of polishing glasses. He had seen men act before a Frank Dalmar was acting now. Deliberately setting out to get drunk, to drink themselves into blurred oblivion of fact, seeing this oblivion because of problems they had no answer to. Viewed in one light, it was kindness to let them go that way.

Certainly, Ben Dillon told himself silently, Frank Dalmar had a problem. Anyone with a mean old devil like Dalmar for a father, was entitled to the forgetfulness drunk now and then.

Frank worked steadily on the bottle, leaning on his

elbows between drinks. Once he tried to build a cigarette, but fumbled it into a tattered mess. Observing, Ben Dillon decided it wouldn't be long before Frank would be ready for the old bunk in the back room where he could sleep it off as others had done before him.

The door of the Imperial swung and it was Charley Tunnison who came in. The lawyer generally showed up around this time for his after-supper brandy. He was meticulous about such things, taking his meals at the Prairie House, where he roomed, then dropping in at the Imperial for a brandy to settle his stomach and ripen the flavor of his after-supper cigar.

He had his own certain bottle of brandy, and as Ben Dillon poured from this, Tunnison jerked his head toward Frank Dalmar.

"Really getting his nose wet, eh? What for, I wonder?"

Ben Dillon shrugged. "That I wouldn't know. When they get that way, I never bother them."

Though Charley Tunnison was a steady customer, Ben Dillon held no particular liking for him. A plain and fundamental man himself, the saloon owner did not care for the suggestion of ostentation always present in the lawyer's manner. Those special cigars he smoked, and the fact that he must have his own private bottle, tended toward this impression.

That he must have an after-supper brandy in all this somewhat condescending way he went about making a heightened the belief that he fancied himself above the rest that he held himself as being superior to the general run. And as it did with others, this time Ben Dillon

Charley Tunnison sipped his brandy slowly, as though it would wring the last touch of life from the bottle. He smoked his pet cigars that way, smoking every last puff of smoke, and to a certain degree that was something to be sensuous about it. Now, as he slowly lowered the glass to his drink, he kept eyeing Frank Dalmar and the lawyer's glance in his glance became a glare.

Long had he disliked Frank Dalmar and the lawyer's

able to win a degree of favor in the eyes of Susan which he himself had aspired to but never attained. him, Sue Vincent was friendly enough, and she al- cluded him in the frequent gatherings she'd held at re, but never had she shown him any part of the com- able warmth she displayed toward Frank Dalmar. rain man, the lawyer resented this, just as he resented the fact of his more youthful years. Had Charley Tun- lived in one of the world's big cities, he would have his own special barber to keep the grizzle in his hair fully stained and darkened. At one time, Charley Tunni- had held to the hope of talking Sue Vincent into mar- ge, but had long since recognized the virtual impossibility this ever happening, so now had made other plans in cer- in matters.

Tonight his dislike of Frank Dalmar abruptly deepened to something more virulent, to hate. Here was the man who, more than any other so far as Tunnison knew, had found real favor in the eyes of Sue Vincent. Yet he was drunk and getting drunker by the minute. Whiskey slopped on the bar in front of him, more of it slopped across his chin. Tunnison put away the balance of his brandy and moved up beside Frank, sneering his contempt in glance and words.

"You're doing fine, Dalmar—just fine! She'd be proud of you now, Sue Vincent would. Her fine friend, Frank Dalmar—just another slobbering drunk!"

Ben Dillon was at the far end of the bar, but he caught the remark and frowned his quick disapproval as he straight- ened up.

Frank Dalmar had another glass of whiskey half way to his lips. He held it so while he slowly turned to stare foggily at the man beside him. Then, with measured deliberation, he threw the contents of the glass into the lawyer's face, as Tunnison reeled back, grabbed the bottle off the bar, and made a swinging blow with it.

He missed with the first attempt, so took a lurching ahead and swung again. This time he hit the lawyer a the face with the bottle, a savage, meaty impact, clut-

Tunnison to the floor. And he was in a weaving crouch over the prone, senseless lawyer, bottle lifted for another smash, when Ben Dillon came up from behind, dragging him back and taking the lethal bottle away from him.

The kitchen of the Running M ranchhouse was large and airy. And, as Mandy Madison always kept it, spotless. Pots and kettles ranged along the wall beside the stove were scrubbed until they shone in the lamp glow, and the stove was polished to a deep gloss. Sue Vincent stood before this now, turning sizzling ham in one pan and frying potatoes in another. A pot of coffee gave off its good fragrance, while in the oven a pan of biscuits fluffed and browned.

Sue was subdued, deeply thoughtful. Better than an hour ago she had ridden in at Running M, and immediately sensed the strain and anxiety which shrouded the place. Old Pearly Grimes had taken her horse and Doc Jerome had met her at the door. Right after, she had faced Mandy and taken her in her arms. Which brought the surcease of tears to Mandy and won Sue an answering hug.

Sue had not gone into the sick-room at all. She could do nothing useful there. Her part was to take over the household chores and offer Mandy the support of companionship when and where she might need it. So now, she was cooking supper.

Doc Jerome came into the kitchen, washed up and took a chair at the table. He caught Sue's questioning glance and shook his head.

"No change," he said. "Can't really expect any but you. Maybe around midnight when the first effects of shock should begin to wear off, I'll have a better idea. Fine if you'll come over, Sue. It's done Mandy a lot of good."

Earlier, Mandy Madison had declined all suggestions of food, taking only a cup of coffee. So now Sue Vincent put ham and potatoes in front of Doc. Brought her butter and biscuits from the oven and poured her cup of coffee. She fixed a plate for herself and sat down across from Doc. Finally she questioned him.

"What do you think, Doctor?"

"Think—about what?"

"Nels. Who could have shot him—and why?"

Doc considered soberly while he stirred sugar into his coffee.

"Any opinion of mine must be only conjecture and surmise."

"I'll be satisfied with that," Sue told him.

Doc fixed her with a slightly frowning regard.

"You've heard what my findings were in Packy Lane's death?"

"Yes. Link Asbell told me. Do you think there is any connection between that and what has happened to Nels?"

Doc came back with a question of his own. "Did Link give you an opinion there?"

"Not in exact words. But the way he acted and some things he said, pointed in a certain direction."

"What direction?" asked Doc.

Sue shifted in her chair, disturbed by her thought and reluctant to voice her answer aloud. Doc understood.

"I know," he said. "An ugly, ugly conclusion, isn't it? Yet, what else is there?"

"It—it's unthinkable!" cried Sue softly, but with emphasis. "Even if my father did warn against such a possibility, I can't—I won't believe it!"

"Yet Packy Lane is dead, definitely of a gunshot," Doc reminded. "While Nels lies in yonder room, dangerously wounded. Facts to be faced, Sue girl."

"But Frank Dalmar is my friend—my very good friend," Sue protested. "He doesn't—he isn't—!"

"Probably not," cut in Doc, nodding. "I'll go along with you there. I doubt Frank had anything at all to do with either shooting, or that he even knew they were going to happen, for that matter. But I can't honestly say the same for Jonas Dalmar or Bardo Sampson. I've played considerable poker at the same table with those two, and if you play poker enough with a man, you get a pretty fair idea of his capabilities in all things and in all directions."

"It's unthinkable," declared Sue again, her voice dropping to a taut murmur. "I tell you, I won't believe it!"

"There," chided Doc gently, "speaks a childhood echo, my dear. In that wondrous age we could believe only what we wished to believe. But when as adults we meet with some of the brutal facts of life, then we must acknowledge reality."

Her eyes big and dark with growing apprehension, Sue was silent for a little time before asking:

"If—if what you and Link hint at is true, what could be the purpose behind it?"

Doc shrugged. "Greed, hate, a twisted idea of revenge for some past injury, real or fancied—any one of the many meaner passions mankind seems heir to. In this case, maybe a little of several of them. Thinking back, Sue, do you recall any of the causes for conflict and antagonism between your father and Jonas Dalmar?"

She considered soberly.

"No doubt there were a number I never did hear about or fully understand. I certainly remember one favorite remark of my father's."

"That 'they do not like us and they never will,'" suggested Doc quickly.

Sue nodded. "Yes, that one. And then I remember one time hearing Dad say that Jonas Dalmar would trade his hope of heaven for the summer range in the Saddlebacks."

"Well," pointed out Doc, "the Saddlebacks are still there, aren't they?"

Sue toyed with her food for a little time before asking another hesitant question.

"Should it be what you and Link Asbell think, Doctor, how can it be headed off—stopped?"

"I wish I had an easier answer to that than I have, my dear," Doc said gravely. "But when something like this starts, a thing basically violent and predatory, it can only be stopped by a convincing display of superior violence."

"Meaning more shooting, *more—more* killing—?"

"I'm afraid so. And, that being so, in one thing you're very lucky, Sue."

"Lucky!" she cried. "How can you use such a word in the face of what—of this—?"

"Facts, my dear—facts," said Doc steadily. "This is an adult world you're in now, remember. And as long as Big Five may be faced with what could be a fight for its very life, then I say you're mighty lucky to have a man like Link Asbell to shoulder the load. If you'll permit me some mildly profane emphasis, I'll say you're damn lucky!"

Softly moving, Mandy Madison appeared at the kitchen door.

"Doctor, he's stirring!"

Doc pushed back his chair, got to his feet and followed Mandy into the further depths of the house.

Left alone, Sue Vincent set her half emptied plate aside, concerned only with hot coffee and the dark oppression of her thoughts. The first touch of this shadow had come to her last night when Link Asbell faced her in the patio of the home ranch with the bleak news of Packy Lane's death, together with the strong suspicion that it had not been accidental or due to natural causes.

The word had naturally taken the edge off the evening for her, and she could hardly wait for her guests to leave. When they finally did and she sought her bed, she found she could not sleep, so had wrapped a robe about herself and gone into the ranch office to wait for Link Asbell's return from town, knowing he'd check the light in the office when he did return.

She thought of how he looked when he stepped in out of the night, lean face drawn with fatigue, a darkening bruise forming high on one cheek, and with the hot embers of conflict still smoldering in his eyes. That same fire had left him somewhat blunt and uncompromising, yet behind his sternness of word and manner, there had been, as always, the hint of a gentleness he'd never failed to accord her.

But this afternoon, when, driven by restlessness, she had ridden with Frank Dalmar, on returning home she had faced the grimmest, bleakest Link Asbell she had ever known, a Link Asbell who had ordered Frank off the place. There had been no gentleness in him then, just a sort of leaning,

crouched implacability which retreated not an inch from Frank Dalmar's angry retort or her own flaring indignance.

Always before, no matter what their disagreement might be, she had been able to force some vestige of retreat from Link Asbell. Not this time! And then, along with everything else, he'd brought not only the ugly truth of Packy Lane's murder, but also the word of the attempt to do the same to Nels Madison. And that had swiftly drained all the anger from her and left her quaking and afraid.

She was still uneasy, still frightened, not only because of the ominous surge of events, but because of certain things she had, in her flaring anger, said to Link Asbell. Such as him being through on Big Five, that she was letting him go, that she was going to write out his time!

Whatever had possessed her to say such things? They were unthinkable! What would Big Five be without Link Asbell to handle the crew and run ranch affairs in his sure, dependable way?

Had he, she wondered somewhat feverishly, taken her at her word? Of course she had not done at all what she threatened. The news Link had brought about Nels Madison had completely knocked all that foolish, hot-headed nonsense out of her. Yet he might have packed his gear and ridden away, disdaining to wait for any wages due him, for well she knew what a deep, enduring pride and solid self-respect lay behind the soberly even demeanor that was Link Asbell's usual way.

She remembered the strange, still look of him when she flayed him verbally in front of Frank Dalmar. Of a sudden he seemed to have moved completely away from her and then stood far out there, a lone and solitary figure. And a stranger! What if, as such, he'd ridden away from Big Five for good?

Doc Jerome came back into the kitchen, rubbing his hands and exclaiming with satisfaction.

"That Nels! The man's strong as an ox, for he's coming out of shock already. Which is good—good! Sue, girl—I'm ~~going to~~ really enjoy the rest of my supper!"

Sue did not press Doc for further conversation. She had

ty now to occupy her thoughts. For added to the conviction Link Asbell had so plainly expressed by word and action, she now had Doc Jerome's conclusions to ponder over. And both led to the same place, pointing a finger at the same source of dark shadow spreading so suddenly and ominously across the range.

Finishing his supper leisurely, Doc went out under the stars to smoke a quiet pipe. It had been a long day and an arduous one for Doc and he seized on this opportunity to relax for a little time.

Alone again in the kitchen, Sue Vincent got the dishes together and set about washing them and tidying things. The house was very still, and all the little sounds of the outer night carried to Sue through the open window. Came too, on the cooling flow of night air, a pungent drift of tobacco smoke from Doc's pipe.

Which awakened a stir of recollection for Sue, carrying her back across the several years. For Mike Vincent had been an inveterate pipe smoker, and the ever-present breath of this had been as familiar a thing about the home ranchhouse as the grim, tough old cattleman himself.

She was startled at the strength and fervency of the memories which suddenly piled up on her. Not since the first few months immediately following her father's death, had she appreciated as she did this moment, how great a gap her passing had left in her world.

She remembered what a secure haven his big arms had been against all of childhood's fears and dark fancies, and the reassurance in his deep, rumbling laugh that would send her forth again, bright eyed and confident. Mike Vincent had been a great, gnarled oak, spreading the wide shade of security. But the elements of time and age had felled that and now there was an emptiness against the sky.

Outside, in the dark, a small glow flared as Doc passed a freshening match across the bowl of his pipe. Right came the mutter of approaching hoofs and the skirl of board wheels against the earth. The rig pulled up at the ranchhouse porch and Rupe Hahn's voice sounded.

"That you, Doc? Good! Here's the stuff you sent me after. And here's word from your wife. You're needed in town if you can make it."

"The devill" Doc exclaimed. "Why?"

"Charley Tunnison. His face is all busted up. Him and Frank Dahnar got in a ruckus in the Imperial and Dalmar hit him with a whiskey bottle."

Doc swore mildly. "This damn stretch of country's gone crazy. What did those two fight about?"

"According to Ben Dillon, young Dalmar stirred up in the Imperial, part full of whiskey and punch full of some kind of troubles, and set out to get good and drunk. Ben said it's no use arguing with anybody when they get that way. The thing to do is let 'em go ahead and drink themselves blind, then put 'em in the back room to sleep it off."

"Well, Frank Dalmar, he's pretty well down the road when Charley Tunnison comes in for his after-supper shot of brandy. He looks Dalmar over, moves up by him and makes some sort of remark that carried Sue Vincent's name. After which, Dalmar grabs the whiskey bottle and belts Tunnison across the face with it. I was at your office when they brought Tunnison in. He was a mess. Your missis, she did what she could for him, but she said to tell you his nose is plenty busted and there's some stitchin' to do where his cheek is split open. She said fixin' up his nose was going to be a mean chore unless you got at it pretty quick, because everything is swelling out of shape."

"What blasted idiots men can be!" Doc snorted. "Well, half an hour ago I'd have said Tunnison would just have to wait and suffer, but the way Nels is picking up I think I can safely spare time to run into town. But I'll want to get back again tonight. So, while I check on Nels again, Rupe, you hook a fresh team to the rig."

Doc knocked the dottle from his pipe and carried into the house the medical supplies Rupe Hahn had brought. Listening, Sue Vincent heard the murmur of voices as Doc gave Mandy Madison some last minute instructions. Right ~~and~~ bag in hand, Doc hurried out into the night again.

THE SUN WAS but a few minutes high the next morning when Link Asbell rode up to Running M headquarters. In his shirt sleeves, Doc Jerome stood on the porch, stretching and yawning widely. Doc's hair was rumpled and he was sleepy eyed.

"You," said Asbell, dismounting, "look like you'd had a hard night. How's Nels?"

Vincent's name in it, and Dalmar let him have it with the bottle."

"Now," said Asbell, with a quick harshness, "that's a mark in Dalmar's favor. Too bad he didn't hit Tunnison again."

"He was going to, so I understand. He had Tunnison on the floor and was all set to brain him proper when Ben Dillon hauled him off."

Asbell set to building a smoke. "Nels is really doing good, Doc? You're not just saying he is?"

"You should know me better than that," retorted Doc bluntly. "One thing I never, never do, is soft talk either myself or anyone else about the condition of a patient of mine. When I say Nels is doing fine, I mean just that."

"Didn't mean to ruffle you," Asbell apologized. "It's just that I've been worried."

"Sure," said Doc. "I know. Now I'm asking you something. Where are you heading, with a rifle slung to your saddle and a six-shooter to your waist? As I recall, you never used to pack a gun."

"And as I recall," said Asbell drily, "it was a certain Doc Jerome who warned me to keep an eye on both sides of the trail, as well as throwing a look over my shoulder every now and then. Besides, when I didn't pack a gun, that was day before yesterday. Things have happened, since then."

"True enough," Doc nodded. "But you still haven't said where you're heading."

Asbell considered for a moment before answering slowly.

"That depends on what Sue Vincent has to say. I'll know better after I've had a talk with her. You might tell her I'm out here."

Sue provided the answer to this need by now showing in the ranchhouse doorway, after which she came along the porch a little diffidently. Doc, ever tactful, went back into the house, again yawning and stretching.

Sue dropped slowly down the porch steps and stood in front of Asbell. Her manner was subdued, hesitant, yet backed by a veiled suggestion of eagerness.

"Link," she said. "It—it's so good to see you."

He regarded her gravely, startled at her manner and words, neither being at all what he'd expected. It was as if she was welcoming him back from some lengthy absence, instead of a mere few hours.

"That sounds as if I'd been a long time away, Sue. I haven't."

"Yes, you have," she declared. "Last night you were so far—so awfully far away. Oh, that probably doesn't make sense to you, but it does to me. Link—I—well, I didn't mean what I said yesterday afternoon. About you—you leaving Big Five." She hurried on to emphasize this. "No, I didn't really mean that. I was just angry—unthinking. Link, you must never take me at my word, if I should ever say such a thing again!"

Never had she known the rush of feeling toward Link Asbell as at this moment. The feeling of deep gratitude that he was standing there before her. A tall, spare man, with the morning sun building a shading of clean, hard bronze across the angular planes of his lean face—a man who was solid and sure and dependable. In him there was no gift of empty small talk, but when he spoke he said what he thought and meant what he said.

Now also, where a wariness, a guarded remoteness had lain far back in his eyes, a renewed warmth began to build, and somehow he was not that distant figure he'd been yesterday afternoon, but instead the familiar, steadfast Link Asbell of old.

A sob tightened Sue's throat.

"Oh, Link—sometimes I can be such a fool!"

"Not so," he reassured gently. "Just a mite headstrong, that's all."

Like Doc, Sue Vincent had marked the rifle under his saddle fender and the gun-weighted belt sagging at his hip.

"The guns," she said. "I—I don't like them, but I know you wouldn't carry them unless you felt you should. Link—you'll be very careful?"

"Of course," he promised. Then he conceded a point. "About Frank Dalmar—I could have been a little wrong there."

"I understand Tunnison used Sue Vincent's name," Asbell probed. "Just how did he use it?"

"Frank was pretty drunk," Dillon explained. "Tunnison, sarcastic as hell, was jibing him for being that way, and ended up saying Sue Vineent would sure be proud of him if she could see him. Then Frank hit him."

"Where's Frank now?"

Dillon jerked a shoulder point. "Sleeping it off in the back room. He really tied one on, Link."

Asbell considered, lips pursed. "Why would he do that, I wonder? As I recollect, he always handled his liquor well."

Dillon shook his head.

"Can't prove it by me. He was carrying a pretty fair edge already when he came in, and seemed to have a lot on his mind."

"He try and tell you any of his troubles?"

The saloon owner shook his head again.

"Not a peep. He just fastened on to the bottle and indicated he wanted to be left alone with it. I obliged."

"What about Tunnison?" Asbell asked.

"Holed up in his room in the Prairie House. I reckon," Dillon said. "Last night, Jigger Henley and me, we lugged him over to Doc Jerome's office. Then, after Doc came in from Running M and fixed him up, we steered him over to his room. He's one damn siek hombre, Link. He ain't going to be frisking around smoking those big eigars for some time."

"That's all right with me," Asbell said. "When he does I'll have an earful of strong talk saved up for him. He's been a guest out at Big Five a good many times. He never will be again."

From the Imperial, Asbell crossed to Whit Henderson's store. Whit, busy restocking a shelf with canned goods, looked over his shoulder.

"You," he accused, with the freedom of old friendship. "are spending more time in town than you are. ranch these days. What's the matter—no cows? Five any more?"

"Raising cows there and maybe a littl

other places," Asbell retorted in kind. "Then there's another point. I want you to order in another stove for Big Five-line camp cabin size, with about half a dozen lengths of chimney pipe to go with it."

"That sounds like you intend to build again above Rosebud?"

"We do. The old stove up there was pretty rickety, and going through the fire didn't improve it any. You know the kind I mean, Whit. About so high and so gross." Asbell framed the approximate dimensions with his spread hands.

"I know," the storekeeper said.

He finished with the last of the cans and tossed the empty packing case into a corner before asking the same question Ben Dillon had.

"What's the word on Nels Madison?"

"Everything considered, it couldn't be better."

"Now that I like to hear!" Henderson exclaimed. "The best of folks, Nels and Mandy." He indicated Asbell's gun. "You, I see, are getting smart."

"It seems to make sense," Asbell admitted soberly. "Whit, what's your feeling on the ruckus between Frank Dalmar and Charley Tunnison?"

Answer was quick and emphatic.

"Tunnison got exactly what was coming to him. Considering conditions and the place, it was a damned insult to even mention Sue Vincent's name. I can't imagine what got into Tunnison; I always figured him more intelligent than that. Anyway, he let his mouth go loose and got it closed for him—and plenty! Drunk or not, you got to hand it to Dalmar for shutting him up the way he did."

Spinning a cigarette into shape, Asbell spoke with a slow thoughtfulness.

"You know, Whit, when a set of conditions that have held over the years along a range finally begin breaking up, you sure see sides to people you never thought were there. It makes a man wonder."

Outside, hoofs muttered along the street, and over in front of the Imperial a buckboard pulled up, with a rider swinging

in beside it. Jonas Dalmar was driving the buckboard and the rider accompanying him was one Wiley Goss. Jonas Dalmar did not leave the rig immediately. Instead, he sat hunched forward, staring at Link Asbell's horse, tethered further along the hitch rail.

From intent consideration of a Big Five horse, with a rifle slung under the saddle fender, Jonas Dalmar presently straightened and swung his narrow head in a quick survey of the street. After which he droned a few thin words of instruction to Wiley Goss before leaving the buckboard and making his gaunt, angular way into the saloon.

Wiley Goss left his saddle, tethered both his own horse and the buckboard team, then took up position at a corner of the Imperial, tipping a leaning shoulder against the wall and fashioning a smoke while his head swung back and forth, his glance seemingly casual, but none-the-less careful.

From inside the shadowed doorway of the store, Link Asbell and Whit Henderson observed and wondered.

"Now there's a lovely pair who act like they might be fixing to raid somebody's hen roost," Henderson murmured. "Or would you say that Jonas Dalmar has acquired a body-guard? Else why would a hard nut like Wiley Goss be tagging along and keeping such an alert eye on this and that?"

"I'm going over there and find out," Asbell said. "Just why should Jonas Dalmar be so damn interested in my horse and gear?"

"You got a point there," admitted Henderson. "But watch yourself, my friend. Once in my travels I turned over a rock and uncovered a side-winder. That fellow Goss has always reminded me of such."

Asbell moved out, crossing the store porch, dropping off it into the street. He tramped over, ducked under the hitch rail and came up with a quick swing that put him facing Wiley Goss.

"Would you be looking for somebody, Goss? Me—maybe?"

Wiley Goss held his posture against the building, his blocky, strange-shaped body negligently leaning, thick of leg and waist, tapering up from these to

TOUGH
ing shoulders. The pull of a puckered scar on his chin
his lower lip sag, thus exposing his teeth in a rodent-
grimaace. There was no depth at all to eyes that were
d and watchful and dull as weathered lead. He took
her drag on his cigarette before answering Asbell.
Why'd I be lookin' for you? You're no interest to me.
it a man take the sun without bein' asked damn fool
estions?"

"My horse and gear seemed to interest your boss out of
reason," Asbell reminded coldly. "Why?"
Goss shrugged his narrow shoulders. "How would I know?
ask him."

"I intend to," Asbell stated. "Let's go inside!"
Intentness deepened Wiley Goss's stare. "Go ahead."
"You, too—and first!" Asbell said.
Tautness stole through Goss. "Wrong time of day for a
joke, Asbell."

"No joke. We're going into the Imperial, you and me. And
like I said before—you first!"
"There," said Wiley Goss, "is something we could argue
"

"So we could," was Asbell's stony retort. "You want to—
wp?"

Slowly, Wiley Goss pushed away from the building, care-
lly squaring himself. He measured Asbell again, then shook
his head.

"This I can't figure, Asbell. You throwin' your weight at
peaceful folks, fixin' to push them around. No, I just can't
figure it."

"You don't have to figure it," Asbell told him. "We'll just
do as I said."

He was still then, letting the full pressure of his intent pi-
up and weigh heavier and heavier on Wiley Goss. Present-
the pressure broke through. A big blob of sweat gathered
under Goss's hat, squeezed free and trickled down his jaw.
He shrugged, mumbling.

"If that's the way you want it, it ain't worth arguing ov-

He moved past Asbell with dragging spurs and turned in at the Imperial door, Asbell at his heels.

Ben Dillon was at the far end of the bar, watching the rear door of the room. The door was open and beyond it sounded the rasp of harsh words. And now Frank Dalmar came stumbling through.

The upper part of his shirt lay wet and dark against his chest and shoulders. Water ran down from his soaked and tangled hair, streamed across his liquor punished face and leaked into his blurred and swollen eyes. With a dazed, uncertain motion he tried to wipe his eyes clear with the back of his hand.

Behind Frank stalked his father, gaunt and contemptuously angry. He carried Frank's hat in one hand and an empty water bucket in the other. When, looking past Frank, Jonas Dalmar saw Asbell, he broke off a sneering tirade at his son, dropped the water bucket to the floor, put his free hand on Frank's shoulder and gave him a shove toward the front door of the place.

"Hold on a minute!"

As he spoke, Ben Dillon reached for bottle and glass and poured a stiff three fingers of whiskey. He pushed the glass to the edge of the bar.

"Put that away, Frank. Do you good."

"Like hell!" Jonas Dalmar let go of Frank and swept glass and contents to the floor, the glass making a faint little crash as it struck and broke. "No more of that stuff for him. He must have swam in it last night!"

"If he did," Ben Dillon stated bluntly, "it was probably because he was trying to get away from the fact that such a damned old tarantula as you are his father!"

Dillon set out and filled another glass, and again fixed stern gaze on Jonas Dalmar.

"Frank may be your son, but I see him as a suffering human being, and I know what he needs to straighten him out. He needs a big drink, which I've poured for him. And if you bust another glass on me, you'll get hit harder than Charley Tunnison did last night. All right, Frank—drink up!"

TOUGHER
Frank Dalmar wanted that drink, bad! He pulled away
his father, cupped the glass in both hands as he lifted
his lips, spilling only a little of the liquor before he
ed it down. After which he let out a long sigh and leaned
nst the bar. Then, as the drink burned away some of the
gover stupor, he looked at Dillon, voicing a mumbled
nks.

"That's all right," Dillon said, handing across a clean
r towel.

With this Frank mopped the water from his face and hair
nd turned tonelessly to his father.

"I'll take my hat."

He donned this and headed for the door. Jonas Dalma
noded to Wiley Goss.

"Go with him!"

Goss moved to obey, but Frank came around on him
savagely.

"Stay away from me!"

Goss shrugged and remained as he was.

Ben Dillon said, "Your horse is at the livery barn, Frank,
igger Henley put it up for you, last night."

Frank said, "Thanks," again, turned and went out.

Jonas Dalmar, full of a banked, frustrated anger, had to
turn it loose somewhere, so chose Wiley Goss.

"I told you to stay outside and keep an eye on things. Why
didn't you?"

Wiley Goss had no answer, but Link Asbell did.

"I persuaded him he'd better come inside with me."
"Now that's taking a hell of a lot on yourself. Just why?"

"A hunch I had," Asbell drawled. "When you drove
you were so interested in my horse and gear, I thought
might be interested in me, too. And when a certain bree
human shows particular interest in me, then I want 'em
front of me, where I can keep an eye on them. Goss, I
one of yours—that's where I wanted him."

Jonas Dalmar waved an angry hand. "That kind o
goes round and round, getting nowhere. What are you c
at, anyhow?"

"At anything you want to make of it" Asbell told him coldly.

For the briefest moment Jonas Dalmar's eyes showed a hot glitter. Then he waved his hand again.

"Around and around, that's all. Just around and around." He turned to Ben Dillon. "What do I owe you for a broken glass, the spilled whiskey and for Frank's lodging overnight?"

Ben Dillon was blunt. "Not a damn thing. Anything I did for Frank was for him personally—not for you."

"You, too," Jonas Dalmar cried. "Around and around. All right, Goss—let's get out of here."

He stamped away, a laak, venomous old man. Wiley Goss his face set in sullenness, followed.

Ben Dillon came around the bar with a broom and began sweeping up the fragments of the shattered glass.

"Me," he growled, "I'm getting so I can't stand the poisonous old devil. Link, you should have heard the way he rawhided Frank. Then doused him with a bucket of water like you might sluice off a hog in a trough. He was bringing up a peck of trouble for himself, turning in the way."

"Jonas Dalmar will never change," Asbell said. "That arrogant streak in him and he wants to remain that all. No, he'll never change."

Dillon, having mounded the broken glass in a pile, now swept this on to a piece of cardboard and dumped it behind the bar. He cast a sober glance on Asbell.

"I don't know how deliberate it was, but you laid it on heavy just now. In the way of the Packy Lane and Nels Madison. You didn't exactly suggest a section?"

Asbell leaned against the bar. "I don't know," he said. "I considered. Some things would have been considered."

TOUGH SAID
not dead sure of anything. And you got to be sure; you can't afford to guess. Reason I threw it at Dalmar, I thought maybe I'd tip him off balance and he'd blurt out something before he thought. But he was too cagy. He backed away from that corner slick as grease, you notice, waving his hands and calling everything you and I said just talk that went round and round, meaning nothing."

"I wouldn't put anything past him," Ben Dillon declared darkly. "He's the kind who would burn you at the stake if he thought he could get away with it. Damned if I don't feel sort of sorry for Frank."

"Now there," Asbell said quickly, "is an angle really worth considering. You ever see Frank in that condition before, Ben?"

The saloon owner shook his head. "Never. Not anywhere near it."

"Why this time, do you think?"
Dillon shrugged. "Like I told you before, it was plain had something on his mind when he came in, something was riding him hard and heavy. And he just set out to get away from it."

"Yeah," murmured Asbell softly. "And I wonder what something could be?"

"You can't prove it by me," Dillon said. "He never let

FROM THE Imperial to the livery barn started as quite a journey for Frank Dalmar. Emerging on the street he paused, pulling his hat low, for, after the shadowed interior of the saloon the bright pour of the sun was pure torture to his bloodshot eyes. In addition, his head was a vast torment of throbbing misery. And, though the drink Ben Dillon poured for him had helped a lot, his stomach was on fire and fiercely uneasy.

Nor was the street the usual level, solid stretch. Instead, at the moment it contained an up-and-down shiftiness, so when Frank started along it, he moved with his feet spaced carefully to brace against such treacherous goings-on. However, physical activity in itself proved a help, and the further he went along the more things steadied down.

From the doorway of the stable, Jigger Henley saw Frank heading his way. Whereupon Jigger got busy and by the time Frank turned in, had his horse in the runway and was saddling up. A man who liked a cold drink of water at regular intervals throughout the day, Jigger always kept a canvas water-bag hanging from a wall peg. Sight of the bag, with its moist, bulging bulk, set off a raging thirst in Frank Dalmar. Noting Frank's avid glance, Jigger nodded.

"Go ahead," he said. "Help yourself."

Frank lifted down the water bag, rinsed his mouth, then drank long and deep, the wet coolness of the water pouring all through him, quenching the inner fires, swelling and soothing all his tissues. He paused for breath, then drank again. Sighing, he replaced the water bag and turned to Jigger.

"Obliged," he mumbled gruffly. "And for looking after my horse." He reached for his pocket. "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing."

Frank protested. "That's not right. You got to live, too. How much?"

"Nothing," Jigger said again. "You paid in advance, last night."

Frank frowned, blinking. "I don't remember paying you anything."

"Not in money," Jigger admitted. "You earned a night's care for your horse when you shut Tunnison's mouth for him."

"Oh!" murmured Frank. "That?"

"Yeah," Jigger said. "That."

He slipped the headstall into place, handed Frank the reins.

Frank climbed carefully into the saddle, settled himself, started to say something, changed his mind and rode out.

Clear of town he took the home trail, and though his horse wanted to run a little, he held it to a swinging walk. For he had some stern thinking to do. Yesterday, under the first numbing shock of what his father had disclosed, his mind seemed to lock, holding no clear thought at all. Then, his only impulse had been to get away, to find a refuge of some sort wherein he could blank out everything.

Now, however, despite the kind of night he'd been through, and though his head was still a throbbing torment, thoughts were clearing. Also, from some previously unguessed corner of his character, emerged grim conviction, which, by the time Double Diamond headquarters lifted out of the plain ahead, became equally grim decision.

Knowing thirst again, his first act on reaching home was to seek a faucet under the windmill tower and once more quench the inner fires. This taken care of, he went into the cook shack.

"Fix me a meal, Joe," he ordered.

The cook made out to argue. "Noon grub ain't too far away. You can wait—"

"Nol" cut in Frank harshly. "Fix it now. Get at it!"

The cook stared, showing some surprise. Then he shrugged sulkily, stirred up the fire and put on a frying pan.

Frank went over to the ranchhouse and to his room. Here he made a compact roll of a couple of blankets. A scarf-carried rifle hung from one wall peg, a belt and holstered six-shooter from another. He laid the rifle on the blankets and buckled on the belt gun. Into a pair of saddle-bags he dumped a couple of boxes of ammunition, added some odds and ends of clothing and a pair of field-glasses. Finally he tossed a blanket-lined, canvas coat to the pile and carried it all out of the house and over to his horse.

Saddle-bags, blankets and coat he tied behind the cantle. The rifle he slung under the near stirrup leaver. These things taken care of he returned to the cookshack and sat down to tough steak, cold biscuits and luke-warm coffee.

Done with his meal he located an empty flour sack and in the cook's storeroom, filled it to bulging. The cook eyed him gloomily, but said nothing. Frank carried the sack of supplies over to his horse and slung it to his saddle horn. While he was about this, Bardo Sampson appeared in the doorway of the bunkhouse, observed for a moment, then crossed over.

"What's the idea?" he demanded heavily. "Where you think you're going?"

Frank looked his father's partner up and down with open hostility.

"None of your business!"

Bardo Sampson's protuberant eyes bulged.

"Why damn your insolent hide—you can't talk to me that way!"

"I did," Frank said coldly. "And if you don't like it—what are you going to do about it?"

Bardo considered him with an angry astonishment. While he and Frank had never got along too well, with Frank, so far as was possible always keeping his distance, up to now their relationship had been pretty much an only slightly soft-tened arrogance of command on Bardo's part, and a sullen and wordless resistance from Frank. But here was a new Frank, not only showing the old personal aversion and distrust

a little time, trying to dredge some significance from it. Failing, he shrugged, crossed to his horse and left town.

A number of times in the past had Jonas Dalmar visited with Charley Tunnison in the latter's office. But this was the first time to seek Tunnison in his room, so he had to ask. Husk Greeley left off a chore of washing some front windows while he gave answer.

"Tunnison? Number Seven." Husk added, grinning, "Better walk soft and speak the same way, Jonas, for I doubt any Dalmar is exactly popular with Charley right now. He's fit to tie."

Dalmar grunted and went along the hall, pausing at Seven to knock. He entered to a mumbled summons.

Charley Tunnison was in bed, propped against some pillows. A broad white bandage swathed his face from upper lip to hair line. A gap was cut in the lower edge of this for him to breathe through, and from two other slits his eyes glinted between puffed, bruise-blackened lids.

Dalmar paused beside the bed. "Sorry about this, Charley," he said smoothly.

Tunnison's answer, from a combination of physical weakness and a burning inner rage, was thick and husky.

"So you say!"

"I mean it," Dalmar insisted. "I gave Frank hell. I guess he was pretty drunk?"

"As a pig," ground out Tunnison. "But that's no excuse. Drunk or sober, nobody treats me so without paying for it some way."

"A damned unfortunate thing," Dalmar soothed. "I regret it and came to apologize for Frank, which I've done. Now I'd like to talk a little business. You up to it?"

Silent a moment, Tunnison presently nodded. "Keep your voice down. These walls are thin. What is this business?"

Dalmar pulled a chair up beside the bed. He produced a cigar, took the tip off it with that characteristic twisting, hard snap of his teeth, then lit up, making little smacking sounds with his lips while he puffed. He took the cigar from his mouth, looked at the glowing tip of it.

man, gulched and left his head that way and I know that's very rough stuff. And it means a much higher price ahead of me, keeping ~~himself~~ ~~other~~ ~~you~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~you~~ ~~up~~, another five hundred dollars. And how can you blame it too much, or it could go higher."

For some little time Jonas Dalmar neither spoke nor moved. But his face pulled thinner and thinner until it seemed as if the bones would break through the skin. Then he stirred, his words were as tart and harsh as his features.

"You're jumping at a half of a lot of conclusions. What do I know about Lane and Madison being shot? What makes you figure me responsible?"

"If you're not," Tunnison shot back with his quick lawyer's perception, "why all the interest in Doc Jerome's affidavit? Would you be worried over what could happen should it reach Sheriff Hatfield's office in Oakdale?"

"I still say it doesn't tie me in on a thing," Dalmar droned.

"Perhaps not-directly," Tunnison agreed. "But here's what it could do. It could bring in a deputy from Hatfield's office to look and listen. And the day that happens, any chance you ever had of taking over in the Saddlebacks, goes up the flume. You better quit bluffing. Dalmar—because I'm not."

"Bluffing—be damned!" Dalmar rapped. "Don't ever think I am, Tunnison. We made a deal. Now you're trying to crawl-fish. Damn a man whose word is no good!"

"What word?" mocked Tunnison. "Yours, maybe? You speak of a deal. That was made a full month ago. Five hundred dollars you were to pay me. Where is that five hundred? Where is any part of it? And you prate about a man's word! Let me tell you something, friend. Never believe me fool enough to tie in with an old razor-back like you without making sure of a reserve shot or two in the locker. That affidavit is one of such. Now I'm tired of talk. I yearn to see the color of your money. A thousand dollars before the next week is out, or Doc Jerome's affidavit goes to Chris Hatfield. That's it!"

Jonas Dalmar got to his feet. He fixed Tunnison with an ophidian stare.

"It's just too bad Frank didn't smash in your damned skull," he said wickedly. "I've a notion to finish the job—now!"

Again Charley Tunnison shifted under his blankets. The move brought his right hand into view. Gripped in it was a nickel-plated, snub-nosed Bulldog revolver of heavy caliber. The gaping muzzle peered at Jonas Dalmar's gaunt midriff.

"Now there's a notion best got rid of," the lawyer said evenly. "This—" he waved the gun slightly, "has been a long-time bedfellow of mine. You lay a hand on me and I'll shoot your backbone in half. I've taken my last manhandling from any Dalmar. Let's not play at make-believe. Personally, I don't care a thin damn for you—no more than you do for me. Yet we can be useful to each other, so long as we consider facts and stick to them. Now I got some sleep to catch up. I had little enough of it last night, thanks to your drunken son. A final reminder. A thousand, in cash, before the week's out!"

Jonas Dalmar kicked his chair aside in a skidding clatter, then wheeled to the door. Here he paused and looked back.

"And here's a reminder for you, Tunnison. No man ever double-crossed me and made it stick. You better not try. While you're sleeping, chew on that!"

He stepped through into the hall, shutting the door with a slam that echoed forward to where Husk Greeley still labored at his window-washing. Husk turned, wondering, prepared to speak. But when he glimpsed the black and seething fury in Dalmar as the latter stalked past, he said nothing.

In the street, Jonas Dalmar went along to his buckboard where it stood in front of the Imperial, untied the team, climbed into the rig and jerked a beckoning nod to Wiley Goss. He reined the team into quick movement and left town at a pace which made Goss spur to a long lope to keep up.

In his room, instead of trying to woo sleep immediately, Charley Tunnison lay with his thoughts, these so intriguing as to cause him to partially forget the pain in his face and head. For the visit by Jonas Dalmar had brought a number of things into acute focus that had not been entirely clear before.

As the lawyer now saw it, however matters worked out, he

was bound to benefit. Jonas Dalmar would have to come across with the thousand dollars, as the last thing in the world he wanted was any kind of interference from Chris Hatfield's office. Nor, reflected Tunnison sardonically, did he himself want to see such interference. This, however, Jonas Dalmar would never know!

Ahead, if things moved as he calculated they would, Tunnison envisioned for himself a great and rosy future, the kind of future a man attained by being smart enough and shrewd enough to use and maneuver other men to his own ends.

In his mind he pictured how it would be. Big Five and Double Diamond both broken and exhausted from an all-out fight for range and water. It was something Jonas Dalmar had long schemed toward, such a fight, and it had now started. And should another outfit, in this case the Running M, be caught in the grinder and pulled apart, so much the better. For that would leave the range just so much weaker and easier to be taken over by the right man at the right time.

The right time, of course, would be that day when both Jonas Dalmar and Link Asbell lay dead upon the earth. And the right man would be Charley Tunnison, none other! He would be the one to move in and take over, using money where money would serve, and ruthless force where such was needed.

Also—and with this thought his eyes glanced through the mask-like orifices in the bandage—something else might easily come his way. The biggest prize of all. With no one else to lean on, Sue Vincent could turn to him!

As a rule an intensely hard-headed and realistic man, just now Charley Tunnison was so lost in an illusory jungle of wishful thinking, he had become blind to many holes and fool-traps in his reasoning. Also, the falsely glittering promise of it proved both anesthetic and soporific. So, shortly, he slept.

At Double Diamond headquarters, Bardo Sampson watched Jonas Dalmar haul a sweating, winded buckboard team to a stop, climb stiffly from the rig and head into the ranch-house. Shortly Dalmar reappeared and came over to where

was bound to benefit. Jonas Dalmar would have to come across with the thousand dollars, as the last thing in the world he wanted was any kind of interference from Chris Hatfield's office. Nor, reflected Tunnison sardonically, did he himself want to see such interference. This, however, Jonas Dalmar would never know!

Ahead, if things moved as he calculated they would, Tunnison envisioned for himself a great and rosy future, the kind of future a man attained by being smart enough and shrewd enough to use and maneuver other men to his own ends.

In his mind he pictured how it would be. Big Five and Double Diamond both broken and exhausted from an all-out fight for range and water. It was something Jonas Dalmar had long schemed toward, such a fight, and it had now started. And should another outfit, in this case the Running M, be caught in the grinder and pulled apart, so much the better. For that would leave the range just so much weaker and easier to be taken over by the right man at the right time.

The right time, of course, would be that day when both Jonas Dalmar and Link Asbell lay dead upon the earth and the right man would be Charley Tunnison, none other! He would be the one to move in and take over, using money where money would serve, and ruthless force where such was needed.

Also—and with this thought his eyes glanced through the mask-like orifices in the bandage—something else might easily come his way. The biggest prize of all. With it he could lean on, Sue Vincent could turn to him!

As a rule an intensely hard-headed and realistic man, just now Charley Tunnison was so lost in a dreamy haze of wishful thinking, he had become blind to many holes and traps in his reasoning. Also, the falsely glowing promise of it proved both anesthetic and soporific. So, sitting, he day-

At Double Diamond headquarters, Ben Sampson waited for Jonas Dalmar. When he came, he hauled a sweating, wind-blown man to a stop, climb stiffly from the rig and lead him to the back house. Shortly Dalmar reappeared and came over to where

Bardo stood in the bunkhouse door. Dalmar indicated the shadowy interior beyond Bardo.

"Frank in there?"

Bardo shook his head. "Not here. He's pulled out."

"Pulled out! What do you mean?"

"Just that. He ain't here."

"Where did he go?"

Bardo shrugged. "You guess. I don't know and care less. He told me to stay away from him, which I can damn well do!"

"But you must have some idea?" Dalmar persisted.

"No!" Bardo made it definite. "Here's how it was and here's all I know. Frank lit here just long enough to eat, take unto himself some blankets and a sack of grub, grab his rifle and belt gun and head out again. He looked like he'd been through one plenty hard night. I asked him where he was going and he as good as told me to go to hell. So, I wished him the same, and there you have it."

The words brought Jonas Dalmar up gaunt and still, while he calculated with shadowed eyes.

"He took blankets and grub as well as his guns?"

"That's it."

"Sounds like he might be figuring on siwashing it somewhere."

"Could be," Bardo agreed.

"Why would he want to do that? It don't make sense."

Bardo eyed his partner sardonically.

"You know something, Jonas. When it comes to being a completely ornery old buck, you take the cake. I'm beginning to wonder how I've ever gotten along with you for all these years. In my time I've seen some mean ones, but never anybody in your class. You hang to the idea that the more you beat somebody over the head, the better they like you. Well, it just don't work so."

"What kind of fool talk is that?" rapped Dalmar. "Are you turning soft? Because if you are, this is a poor time for such, what with all we got ahead of us."

"Who's turning soft?" Bardo growled. "I know what's

ahead just as well as you do, and when the time comes I'll make just as good a ride as you. But you asked me a question and I set you out an answer. You asked—why would Frank pull out? Well, let me tell you this. In Frank's boots I'd have pulled out long ago."

Dalmar stared. "You crazy? Frank's had it easy. Too damn easy! It's making a bum out of him. But I'll change that. I'll put some wire up his back if I have to take a quirt to him!"

Bardo wagged his head. "You see? Just like I said. Beat 'em over the head. That makes 'em love you." He paused and spat through his teeth. "Like hell it does!"

Dalmar made a restless, annoyed turn.

"What you taking his part for? You never liked Frank, or him you."

"Which ain't got a thing to do with me giving my opinion on why he pulled out," Bardo retorted. He went on with profane emphasis. "God damn it, Jonas—you think you're the only man in the world who's halfway smart? Ain't nobody got an ounce of brains but you? That how you figure? Well, if it is, you're due for one hell of a rough awakening, one of these days. I say it again. If Frank has pulled out for good, it's your own damn fault; not his, not mine. Just yours!"

Jonas Dalmar put his glance past his partner, eyes narrowed and briefly flashing. Then he shrugged.

"He'll get tired sleeping on the ground. He'll be back."

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't," Bardo observed bluntly. "Could be he's got himself a lot of wire up his back. I know I never saw him look quite like he did when he told me off. Right about then, Jonas, your wandering boy was a man—full growed. Which is where you been making your big mistake. For too long you been treating him like he wasn't much more than a bald-faced kid. Always you were ready to throw that sneer and snarl of yours at him, and jibe him plenty about growing up and being a man. Well, it could be Frank's out to show you just how damn well growed up he really is. However it is, you got it coming!"

Badgered, made venomous by the events of the past several hours, Jonas Dalmar flared.

at's a big plenty. Get your tongue off me!"
 spite the pointedness of his remarks, Bardo Sampson's
 de had been more or less relaxed and casual, almost
 -natured. Now a hardness stole through him, and he
 ed to fill the bunkhouse door more fully, and his words
 just as bare and harsh as Dalmar's ever did.
 Now there's another damn fool mistake, Jonas. Shouldn't
 er try to use the whip on me. You do, old as we both are,
 knock your teeth in! Better crawl down off that stump.
 ou ain't that high above me!"

For a moment the black glitter in Dalmar's eyes met the
 rotuberant hardness in Bardo's, then flickered and shifted.
 "Forget it," he said thinly. "This and that have got me
 edgy. Pay no attention to me."
 "Better," growled Bardo. "Much better. What's the word
 from town?"

"Trouble!" Jonas Dalmar bit the word out savagely. "That
 fellow Tunnison figures he's got us on the hip and is set to
 make us pay through the nose."

Bardo blinked. "How's that?"
 "The affidavit Doc Jerome swore to on the killing of Packy
 ane—Tunnison's got it. And he says we pay him a thousand
 ollars within the next week, or the affidavit goes out to Chris
 latfield's office."

"What of it? It don't prove anything against us—not any-
 thing definite."

"No," agreed Dalmar, "it don't. But it would start Hatfield
 looking this way. Which would mean a deputy prowling and
 looking and asking embarrassing questions. Which is some-
 thing we're not quite ready for, just yet."

Bardo considered, heat beginning to build in his eyes.
 "But we had a deal set up with Tunnison. For five hundred
 dollars he was going to keep Hatfield off our necks."

"Sure," Dalmar said bitterly. "But that was then. This
 now. He's got the affidavit as a club so he's doubling the
 and he's double-crossing us. A thousand—or else! That's
 he says."

"And what do we say?" The heat in Bardo's eyes

become a simmering malevolence. "You ain't aiming to pay him that thousand, are you? Me, I'll see him dead, first!"

The ghost of a bleak and wolfish smile twisted Jonas Dalmar's thin lips.

"My own thought, Bardo."

LEAVING TOWN, Link Asbell reached Running M land, angled across it well below headquarters and struck into the climbing lift of the Saddlebacks. He rode with a greater caution than he had known in a long, long time. His glance roved ceaselessly, constantly probing, constantly searching, and when he finally moved out of the short-brush slopes into the shelter of the first belt of timber, he slacked down in his saddle and let go a small sigh of relief. Things had, he reflected somberly, come to a hell of a pass when a man must ride under this kind of tension.

Casting back to the first day he went to work for Big Five, he could never remember a condition comparable to the existing one. True, there had always been a smoldering antagonism between Big Five and Double Diamond, dating back even beyond his time in this country. But, though that antagonism had been a constant source of chaffing irritation, it had never, in his time, erupted into open violence. It had been like a live coal, safely contained and insulated in a deep clot of ashes; a thing which all men knew existed, and casually watched, while not fearing too deeply.

Now, however, that coal had burst through the ashes into savage blaze. Men had been shot from ambush, shot in the back, and when a man rode the open trails these days, he had no idea at what moment, or from what direction or spot, more of that skulking lead might strike at him. To a certain degree there was a sense of unreality about it, as though nothing had actually happened, and that it was all a nightmare.

Asbell shook himself. Nightmare, be damned! If so, then a nightmare of utter reality. . . .

Holding the buckskin to a short breather, he tested the world close about. The massed timber was still and drowsing, with sunlight striking through here and there, spilling pools of pale gold across the forest floor, while the building warmth of the day baked out a piney essence that was both wild and fragrant. It was, he mused, hard to reconcile the savage realities of the moment with a world as serene as this.

In his mind there existed no slightest doubt of the basic responsibility for the shootings of Packy Lane and Nels Madison. Cold logic pointed only one way. At Double Diamond. Which, of course, meant Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson. Neither committing the direct act, but ordering it, and therefore fully as responsible as the skulker who actually aligned the sights and pulled the trigger.

Of this, Asbell was thoroughly convinced. Lacking direct proof, however, he would serve no decisive purpose by getting in touch with Chris Hatfield's sheriff's office. What he, right there on the ground, with all his knowledge of purposes and cross purposes, could not prove, certainly no stranger, even though a deputy sheriff, could find proper solution for. Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson would merely lie doggo until the deputy was withdrawn, after which they would start in where they had left off.

It came to Link Asbell with grim convincingness in this moment of solitary summing up that there could never be any compromise with Double Diamond so long as Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson lived, or until the outfit itself was so thoroughly broken up and weakened it could never be considered again as a factor of any importance.

Advancing from this premise it was obvious that there was but one way to meet the Double Diamond challenge, and that was by fighting fire with fire, by returning all that was sent, with interest! Not to the extreme of shooting men in the back. But by looking them in the eye and facing them down, and if they wanted to argue it out on such terms, so be it!

He set the buckskin to movement again, heading north and

seeking higher elevation. His way skirted ridge points, dipped in and out of gulches, crossed small flats and benches, and traced the edges of hill meadows. Along the way he stirred up cattle, Big Five and Running M cattle, grazing the flats and meadows and benches, browsing in the gulches.

They were wary, but in top shape, for this was a bounty hill-range, and they had cut their trails all across the face of it; trails leading to this or that favored feeding spot, or to some equally favored watering place in the moist, cool depths of gulch or canyon.

Reaching the elevation he had worked toward, Asbell stayed at it, and in time picked up the first echoes of axes at work in a timber thicket. As he came closer there sounded the tearing rush and muffled crash of a fallen tree. When the sound of this had thinned and gone away, he lifted a short call, got his answer, and rode in to see Hughie Logan, Cuff Tilton and Dutch Stauber starting to trim out the newly felled tree. Three other trimmed ones lay nearby.

"Pretty hefty stuff," Asbell observed. "You aiming to build a line cabin or a fort?"

"These are sills," Cuff Tilton explained. "Rest will be smaller stuff. Ain't no sense in building a cabin unless it's done right, and to do it right you got to have a good foundation of big sills."

"Likewise and besides," Hughie Logan suggested cheerfully, "if you're aiming to criticize the efforts of three honest cowhands, who are raisin' a crop of blisters whilst doing hard, menial toil, crawl down off that horse, grab yourself an ax, and demonstrate."

Asbell smiled. "I can do that, too."

Throughout the balance of the day he labored with the others, and found the hours good ones. The circle of the hills, high and clean against the sky; the warm pressure of the sun filtering through the timber to start the sweat and loosen a man's muscles; the raw, rich tang of new-cut pine and fir—all cleared a man's mind and made his thoughts run easier.

At midday, Cuff Tilton cooked coffee and laid out thick,

cold-steak sandwiches. After eating they loafed and smoked for half an hour, then picked up their tools again.

By the time afternoon was done, the new cabin was taking form, the sills squared and trued and securely set, and the first logs of the walls in place. They cached their tools and rode down out of the hills, and while the others set out direct for Big Five headquarters, Asbell angled south, where the lights of Running M glittered through the early dark.

Here, Asbell found Rupe Hahn's challenge coming out to meet him, and when, satisfied with Asbell's answer, Rupe showed himself, first starshine glittered on the barrel of the rifle he had over his arm.

"Just aiming to be a little careful," Rupe explained gruffly. "Two different riders I see driftin' by this afternoon. Neither of 'em was close in. I had to get the glasses to make out who they were. But the way things been going—well—" Rupe shrugged.

"Quite right," Asbell approved. "Keep on being careful, Rupe. Nels—he's still coming along good?"

"Better and better. Doc Jerome, he went back to town a couple of hours ago. He'll be out again tomorrow for a check. He told Mandy there wasn't any need of him staying on tonight, what with Nels doing so good."

"Those two riders you saw—who were they?" Asbell probed.

"One was Frank Dalmar," Rupe answered carefully. "He cut across our land lower down and headed into the hills. I watched for him to show again, but he never did. The other one was way out in the plain, heading north, toward your range. Even with the glasses I couldn't be too sure about him. But if I had to make a guess, I'd say it was that funny built Double Diamond hand—Wiley Goss."

Through the small run of time it took to spin up and light a smoke, Asbell brooded over Rupe Hahn's words. Two Double Diamond riders, prowling the range. That such as Wiley Goss should be doing so, was, all things considered, understandable. But what about Frank Dalmar? What would he be doing in the Saddlebacks? No part of these hills was Double Diamond range, and no Double Diamond stock was

700
m. Therefore, what reason would Frank have for riding
—what good reason?
That Frank might have had anything directly to do with
gulching of Packy Lane and Nels Madison was an angle
t had never entered Link Asbell's mind until this mo-
nt. However, bluntly considered on the basis of time and
portunity, he easily could have. And thus found cause for
e big drunk. For the sneak killing of one man, Packy Lane,
nd near killing of another, Nels Madison, was enough to put
a specter on the most hardened killer's shoulder, one he
might try to escape from in the depths of a bottle of whiskey.

Yet, while well along on that whiskey trail, Frank had
reacted with savage violence toward Charley Tunnison for
using Sue Vincent's name under conditions not entirely
proper. For that, Asbell had mentally awarded Frank a mark
of approval. Also, in the Imperial bar in town this morning,
he had seen Frank angrily at odds with his father, old Jonas
Dalmar, and had seen him turn savagely on Wilcy Goss and
order Goss away from him. All of which might have meant
something, yet could, of course, be of no real significance at
all. However, one fact lay stark and clear. Double Diamond
riders were off their own range and powdering the dust of
trails on the lands of other men. And one of these riders was
Frank Dalmar.

As he put these facts and thoughts together, dismal ch
crawled up inside of Link Asbell.

Light shone strong in a kitchen window of the Running
ranchhouse. Watching, Asbell saw Sue Vincent's head
shoulders pass back and forth several times as she mo
about, readying supper for Mandy Madison and herself
Rupe Hahn and old Pearly Grimes. At the distance he c
not catch her full expression. But he could tell that it
one of soberness. The impact of brutal events had br
this mood to her.

The yellow glow of lamplight built a shining nimbus
her auburn head, and as always, she moved with that s
unconscious grace which, in his eyes, no other wom
matched.

Asbell gathered up his reins, hauled the buckskin around. "Keep on being careful, Rupe," he cautioned again. "Anyone on legitimate business will come directly in. If they prowl the edges, throw a shot at them."

High up in the Saddlebacks, some half mile north of where the rocky, precipitous ribs of the Palisades ran out into the more open hills, there jutted a lofty point, sparsely timbered. From here a man with field-glasses might survey a wide expanse of country and a great many trails. From here he might search the gray and brown and tawny distance of the plain. Also, he could watch the run of the Palisades to the south, and the sweep and climb of the Saddlebacks to the north.

From here a man could look almost directly down, so it seemed, on the toy-like buildings of Running M headquarters. Well beyond and north and deeper into the plain, Big Five headquarters grouped near the willow and alder marked run of Rosebud Creek. More nearly directly east and deeply distant on the plain, flashes of reflected sunset light on ranch-house windows marked Tom Grant's Drag 40 layout. Even further into the plain and miles south, points of that same reflected light positioned Double Diamond headquarters, while in that same general direction, but closer at hand, the windows of Garrison town also struck up their shine.

Sitting on the outermost lift of the point, his back against the bole of a weather-whipped pine, Frank Dalmar rested his elbows on his knees to steady his field-glasses, and so made careful survey of all this that lay before him. His rifle was stacked against the tree, ready to his hand, and several yards back along the crest of the point his horse waited, ground-reined and dozing.

For the past couple of hours Frank had been just as he was, watching and waiting. In that time he marked the movement of several people. Once, far out on the plain, he picked up a drift of dust, with the stir of a rider at the apex of it, heading north. But the distance was so great that even with

of glasses, both horse and rider were much too minute to be identified. He had much better luck with the human activity that went on around Running M. Here he watched Rupe Hahn and Grimes, shifting about, occupied with their several chores. He saw a buckboard pull away toward town, going correctly that this was Doc Jerome. And once a nine figure moved past a corner of the ranchhouse to and in the open clear, either taking the last of the sun for a little time, or watching and waiting for someone. With the sun glinting on her bared head, there was no mistaking her. Vincent.

Frank kept the glasses steadily on her until she went back into the house. Then he lowered the glasses and built a cigarette. He smoked this to a stub in an absorption of bleak and bitter thought.

Afterward he watched the shadows build and thicken on the hill flank, then spread eastward, spilling in a flowing tide across the plain as the sun dropped lower and lower behind the Saddlebacks. When abruptly, it was entirely gone, a blanket of powder-blue twilight settled swiftly over all the world.

Began now evening's push of cooler air down from the higher peaks, and the timber tops took up their weave and sway and gave off the voice of movement. Frank got to his feet, laid a final period of attention on the ranch below and saw the yellow radiance of lamplight break from a couple of windows. After that he picked up his rifle and went back to his horse.

He rode the crest of the ridge away from the point, finally climbing, then dropping off the south side for a little distance before turning into a timbered pocket where a curdled darkness already lay thick, and where a small trickle of spring water broke narrowly from a rocky face and spilled into a lined pool.

Here, earlier in the afternoon, Frank had set up spreading his blankets and hanging his sack of food from a limb. Now he unsaddled, watered and picketed his

After which he built his small fire, cooked and ate a frugal meal, then sat smoking by the dwindling fire while the night turned deep dark and the wind grew chill and at the far side of the basin a horned owl set up its great, round booming.

That night, out at Double Diamond headquarters, Jonas Dalmar listened to reports from two of his men, Sage Wingo and Wiley Goss.

"Frank didn't go back to town," Wingo stated. "Last anybody saw of him there was when he got his horse from Jigger Henley and headed for home this morning. When Bob Custer brought in the Oakdale stage I asked him if he'd seen Frank along the road, and he hadn't. So, if Frank's skipped the country he didn't take the stage road out."

"Skipped the country!" exploded Dalmar harshly. "Where in hell did you get that idea? Of course he didn't skip the country. Why should he? No, he's just off sulking somewhere." Dalmar turned to Wiley Goss, fixing him with hard, black gaze. "Well?"

Goss shrugged. "No better luck here than Sage had. All I saw around Big Five was that Mexican handy man, Tonio Diaz, choppin' wood, and his wife, who cooks and keeps house there, hanging out some washing."

"No sign of Asbell?"

"No sign."

"How about the Vincent girl—you see anything of her?"

"She's at Running M. When I got through prowling Big Five I circled back and came in along Burro Wash and the creek for a look at Running M, and I saw her come out of the house just before sundown."

"And nothing of Frank anywhere?"

"Not hide or hair," affirmed Goss.

Bardo Sampson, listening in on it all, spoke up.

"Use your head, Jonas. Would Frank have taken blankets and grub with him if he'd figured on holing up at some ranch? Of course not. I tell you, Frank's in the hills somewhere."

"Why would he go into the Saddlebacks?" Dalmar argued. "What's in them for him?"

2
Tough Saddle
For one thing, a lot of places where he could find water so set up a decent camp. But why all the fuss and hush? Weren't you the one who said he'd be back when he got tired of sleeping on the ground? So let's forget him and think about the cattle we got to gather and move, and how we can keep that damned shyster lawyer, Tunnison, from running Chris Hatfield's office in on us and raising hell all around."

Jonas Dalmar sat in silence for some little time, scowling and chewing at his cigar. There were things which Bardo Sampson did not know, but which he, Jonas Dalmar, knew all too well. Such as the true reason Frank had taken on the big drunk. That had been because of things he had said and the callous, brutal way he had said them.

When he admitted that Double Diamond was behind the shooting of Packy Lane and Nels Madison, the look that came over Frank had been of mixed incredulity and revulsion. Not warned by this, he had gone on telling what he planned against Big Five and Running M in the immediate future. Finally, still not content, and with the venom rampant in him, he had used the verbal lash wickedly on Frank.

These things, Jonas Dalmar realized now, had been damaging mistakes. For it was not beyond reason that Frank, because of his friendship with the Vincent girl, might carry the entire story to Big Five. Perhaps he'd been vastly wrong in his estimate of Frank's true feelings toward Sue Vincent. Perhaps Frank knew real affection for her, was in fact, in love with her, and would therefore place her interests ahead of Double Diamond. And if Frank hadn't already gone to her with the story, he still might.

Unease stirred and grew in Jonas Dalmar. Once the coup he planned was reality, he wouldn't give a damn what people knew, what they thought, or what they said. By that time he'd have possession of the Saddleback range and, once he did, neither heaven or hell would get it away from him. But until that actual possession was accomplished, it was better that people did not know too much for sure.

He rolled his cigar across his lips and returned his glance to Wiley Goss.

"All right. We'll assume Bardo's right. Frank is in the Saddlebacks somewhere. Go find him and bring him out. Bring him out if you have to clout him over the head and knock some sense into him. But—bring him out! And if by chance you should see Asbell along a trail, do a better job on him than you did on Madison. For men you only half kill can come back to haunt you!"

AT RUNNING M, having fed Rupe Hahn and Pearly Grimes, Sue Vincent sat down to a second cup of coffee with Mandy Madison. Mandy, despite her splendid vigor, looked very tired, her eyes shadowed, her face drawn.

"You," Sue said flatly, "are going to get some decent sleep. You haven't had an hour of it since Nels was hurt. Tonight I sit with him, and you rest."

Mandy shook her head. "You're a darling, Sue girl, and I love you very much for all you've done. But Nels is my man, and when he needs me by his side, that is where I'm going to be."

"But he doesn't need you by his side tonight," Sue protested. "Mandy honey, your Nels is doing fine. If he wasn't, Doc Jerome certainly wouldn't have gone back to town."

"I know," said Mandy soberly. "But—but suppose, in the night, Nels took a—a bad turn—and me not—right there—" At the mere thought, tears blurred the rich darkness of her eyes and spilled down across her cheeks.

"If he takes the slightest turn, I'll call you instantly," Sue promised. "Please do as I say, Mandy. Wearing yourself out isn't going to help anyone."

Mandy weakened a little. "Perhaps I will lie down for an hour or two. But later on. Now I'll help with the dishes."

"You will not!" Sue retorted. "You do your sitting with Nels now. Because I'm going to take over later, and there'll be no more argument."

Mandy smiled softly as she got to her feet. She circled the table, put her arms about Sue and for a little time held that

auburn head tightly against her broad and generous bosom. Then, wordlessly, she went back to her vigil at her husband's side.

While she did up the dishes and put the kitchen in order, Sue Vincent's thoughts ran far and gravely. For the first time in her life she now knew true understanding of the real depths of feeling that could exist between husband and wife. Twice this day she had gone into the room where Nels Madison lay, a big, still figure under the blankets. Except for a shading of pallor beneath the deep weathering of his face, at a glance one might easily believe him merely sleeping.

But there was Mandy, always beside him, faithfully responsive to his slightest stir, with a look about her which made Sue's throat tighten and put the sting of tears in her eyes. For here was how it would be between a man and a woman when they had become one in mind and purpose and body, when they had vowed one unto the other for all their days. Here was a fidelity and a truth and a quiet glory which Sue had never understood before, and in the face of which she now felt strangely stirred and humbled.

Moving on about the kitchen chores, she pondered her own feelings toward the men she knew best; those who, so far in her life, had been her closest confidants and friends. Winnowing quickly through these, she came up with two. Link Asbell and Frank Dalmar. And what were her real feelings toward each of them?

In personalities they came close to being direct opposites. She had found Frank Dalmar pleasurable company because laughter came easily to him, and he could shrug aside all thought of anything but the moment. He was a pleasant riding companion, a good dancer, and carried himself easily in social affairs. And always he was slave to her slightest wish. She had known a definite fondness for Frank Dalmar. But did that fondness still exist in the face of the blunt and brutal facts of the past few days?

Here, unless she held herself to strict reality, it was all too easy to drift into a sense of unreality. All her life, so it seemed, she had listened to her father again and again voice

suspicion of Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson and of ultimate piratical intent toward Big Five. Far back, there been one period of open fighting between Big Five and Double Diamond, but she was a child at the time, and how-er the quarrel had been resolved, it left no impact upon her, any clear memory of actual incident. Also, her father's unrelenting and oft quoted opinion had been like the fabled cry of "Wolf—wolf!" when there was no wolf. And so she had come to feel that his insistence was merely the lingering embers of an ancient hate, with no real basis of possibility.

She recalled once asking Frank Dalmar if, in his belief, such an eruption of violence might ever come. He had scoffed at the bare idea, stating flatly that it was all merely the surly growling of stubborn old men, living in the past, and that it would never be anything more than this, because the old, bad days were gone.

But now there were grim and bitter facts that could prove them both terribly wrong!

It was, Sue knew, Link Asbell's positive conviction that Double Diamond was behind the shooting of Packy Lane and Jels Madison. If this be true, did it incriminate Frank Dalmar in any way? Was it fair to feel that it did? This line of thought led directly to the ugly thing that had taken place in the Imperial saloon in town. Frank in there, sodden drunk and clubbing Charley Tunison down with a whiskey bottle. Because her name had been mentioned. Which, actually, was something aside from the main issue. The big question was why was Frank there in the first place in such a condition?

Why—why—? Of a sudden there seemed so many things making the demand of—why? Sue swung slim, restless shoulders, as though in an effort to shrug clear of all unpleasant and depressing facts, and her thoughts left Frank Dalmar reached to Link Asbell, and immediately it seemed, her steadied and became more confident.

She remembered the day she first laid eyes on Link for some reason she'd never clearly understood or—out, it was a day that stood out with particular clear-

her memory. It was the day her father hired Link. She remembered how he had looked, a tall, lean young rider, still-faced with a taciturnity that was even now characteristic.

And from that very moment, Link Asbell had never left off thinking and planning and working tirelessly for the betterment of Big Five affairs. Because of that innate streak of soberness in his makeup, he was not given to easy smiling, but when that rare glint did strike through, it was like the touch of a quick, warm sunlight. He was a thoughtful man, and basically a gentle one. But on occasion Sue had seen a blazing fury flame in him, and when that happened, he was little less than merciless.

Like the time in town when a brutal teamster, enraged at one of his team, beat the luckless mule about the head with a length of trace chain until he blinded it. Sue remembered how repelled and sickened she had been by the spectacle, how she wept because of it. And never, so long as she lived, would she forget the look on Link Asbell's face as he stalked across the street, shot the mule to put it out of its hopeless misery, then threw the gun aside and went after the teamster like an avenging angel.

He had torn the length of chain away from the fellow and with bare, thundering fists, whipped him down to a bloody, begging heap, then whipped him to unconsciousness, and might have whipped him to death had not Mike Vincent and a pair of Big Five riders pulled him away.

For a full two weeks after that episode, Sue recalled, Link spoke hardly a word to anyone, but moved about in a distant, shadowed world of his own, far apart from anyone. Only gradually did he emerge to resume his old place with the ranch and its affairs.

A second occasion when the fires had flamed savage: was the night Husk Greeley and his wife cleared the tables from the dining room of the Prairie House and held a dance there. Just turned seventeen at the time, Sue rode in town on her father in the buckboard. For a dance held in memory of Mike Vincent, while a poker game in the saloon and he had consigned Sue to the care of her mother.

his features into sharp relief and on them Sue glimpsed a harsh, almost somber gravity.

He extinguished the match with a flick of his fingers and left now was only the crimson spark of his cigarette to sharpen, then wane, then sharpen again against the deep velvet woof of darkness, a dark so deep that it made of night a tremendously vast and lonely thing.

Range born, bred and raised, open night ordinarily held no terrors for Sue Vincent. Even back when she was a very little girl, her father had made of it a place of charm and exciting promise with the fantasy of a story he'd tell her at bedtime. How night was the time when the little people were abroad, riding on the wind and dancing in the starlight to cricket song.

So often in later years she had ridden through it alone, going nowhere in particular. Just riding and coming to know it so thoroughly, while loving the close comfort of its shadows. Night had its own voices, its own fragrances, and when savoring these, Sue felt closer to the truths of Creation than at any other time.

But though night time might be a time of wonders when one knew neither care or worry, in time of trouble it could hold vague threat and the stirrings of an almost primitive fear. It was that way now. Sue tucked a hand inside the comfort of Asbell's arm.

"What is it you wish to talk about, Link?"

He answered with slow care.

"A decision we have to make. You know my feelings about Double Diamond and their intent. I admit I've no positive proof—yet. If I did, the decision would be easier to come by. Because so much that is yours rides on it."

"We discussed that before, Link. I said that that however you felt it wise to move would be all right with me. I still feel that way."

"Even if it means more dead men in the trail—likely enough some of our own as well as theirs?"

The night seemed to turn deeply cold. Sue wrapped her arms about herself and stood staring out into the dark.

up a deadline out in the flats and be set to fight to make the deadline stand."

"Link, you definitely feel that is what Double Diamond intends?"

Asbell shrugged and his voice ran harsh.

"I know this. Double Diamond riders are now prowling trails where they got no legitimate business. Double Diamond riders are crossing our land and Nels Madison's land. If they had legitimate business, they'd bring it direct to our headquarters. Instead, they prowl the edges. Why?"

"Such—such riders have been seen?"

"They have. Rupe Hahn watched two of them today. He saw Wiley Goss on our land and Frank Dalmar crossing Running M, heading up into the Saddlebacks. He watched to see if Frank came out again. If he did, it was after dark."

"Link, you don't think Frank would or could be responsible for anything—well, like what happened to Nels or Packy Lane?" Sue's words were taut.

"I don't know what to think," Link admitted. "I only know that Packy Lane is dead, that Nels Madison was near so, and that Double Diamond is prowling where they shouldn't. And I know what my common sense tells me. Which is that, like it or not, Big Five has the fight of its life ahead."

For a time Sue Vincent stood quietly, digesting the harsh facts Link Asbell had laid before her, then accepting them under the weight of his flatly declared convictions. She drew a deep breath.

"Very well, Link. If fight we must, fight we will. And in whatever manner you believe necessary."

He caught her by the elbows, turned her and looked down at her. Starshine came in across his shoulder, highlighting the soft oval of her face.

"You mean that, Sue? No reservations—no weakening?"

"No reservations, no weakening, Link. Of a sudden I find myself very definitely Mike Vincent's daughter. What we must do for the good of Big Five, we will do!"

Over a long moment he kept his grip on her arms, his hands steely where they touched. With his head tipped, his features

awake through, for she was determined that Mandy have all of it in rest.

Somewhere about midnight or shortly after, had Sue been out on the ranchhouse porch and listening very carefully, she might have picked up the rustle of hoofs, well to the south. For there a rider moved through the star-glow of the flat, into the deeper dark that lay curdled on the hill slopes. These black hill shadows drew horse and rider into a dim anonymity and presently hid them.

A night-feeding deer, startled from its thicket, went away in long, thumping bounds. Later, and higher up, a coyote about to throw its lonely halloo at the dimming stars, caught the first sound of nearing hoofs and held back its cry. When, presently, a shift of air carried the strong scent of intrusion, the coyote faded into nothingness, just a small drift of noiseless movement.

Some quarter mile above this spot, well into the timber, the rider pulled to a halt, dismounted and unsaddled. Then, with the hair- and sweat-caked, but now thoroughly warm, saddle blanket over him, Wiley Goss sprawled on a mat of pine needles and slept.

THE south rim of Rosebud Canyon, Link Asbell shed dawn roll its crimson fire across the plain. His final run to headquarters last night had been in deep dark, this morning, after early breakfast, he had left in dark as just as thick. He had come into the Saddlebacks alone, other work on the line camp cabin having to await the solving of more pressing and important problems. These he had talked over with the crew last night, in a bunkhouse conference. He put all the cards on the table, told bluntly what, in his firm conviction, Big Five faced. He gave it to them exactly as he had to Sue Vincent, earlier, then waited their reactions. Cuff Tilton, grizzled and laconic and brown as dressed saddle-leather, had spoken for all with a dry irony.

"If you're waitin' to see if we're goin' to beg off just because there could be a ruckus ahead—we ain't! Damn any man who'll ride for an outfit in its good times, then let it down when the rough ones come. Lookin' around, I don't see any of such here."

After that, Asbell laid out his orders. Hughie Logan, cheerful, alert, plenty trail wise and able to take care of himself in any company, was to ride the plain, check all signs and watch the trails there. In addition, he was to make a big circle and test the truth of the story that had come through the friend of Tonio Diaz. What about the Double Diamond cattle gather and how far along was it?

Dutch Stauber, stolid, slow moving, but nobody's fool, was to kill some time in town, watchful for any small crumb

information that might fall. Cuff Tilton was to stay close to headquarters, just in case. And he, Asbell would patrol the Saddlebacks and the hill trails. These were the orders for today. Tomorrow they would be whatever developing events demanded.

Asbell climbed high, until, nearing the final crest, he turned south, traveling slowly, pausing at every vantage point for careful study of the country below. All Nature's signs gave evidence that the season was moving along. Already, under the high rims, aspen clumps laid a stain of yellow and gold, and the cherry brush thickets were touched with a deepening flush of rose.

Up here, too, the air was biting crisp, and so clear it seemed to fairly effervesce, and the sunlight sparkled and the world was a great and wonderful place. Through a few short moments, Asbell savored it all with the keenest appreciation, a swift surge of pleasure striking across his face to leave him smiling and full of zestful fancies.

Then the weight of stark reality returned to renew the old shadow of soberness and he threw the full measure of his attention into the search that had brought him into these hills this day. South he rode, threading the heights, watching the last of night's shadows drain from the gulches and sheltered basins as the sun continued to loft and send its lances probing these spots.

It was no easy task he had set himself. Below, a wide band of timber belted the hill slope between the far lower open areas and these high rims. In that timber, if careful to avoid all clearings and meadows, and to keep off well-marked trails, half a hundred riders might stay hidden. But virtually all trails down there were cattle trails, all of them touching a meadow or clearing somewhere along the way, and it was Asbell's gamble that any rider prowling those trails would, sooner or later, show himself.

Once he thought he had picked up a lead when several ravens flared with raucous croaking from the gaunt upper skeleton of a lightening riven pine. But after several swing-

Toward Goss, Frank's attitude had ever been one of blunt dislike and open contempt. As though, Goss had often savagely thought, he were something vastly inferior—something far down the human scale. So Goss vowed, nothing would suit him better than cause to translate Jonas Dalmar's order literally. He'd hugely enjoy clubbing Frank down, giving him a physical going-over.

In fact, he'd even more have liked an order to finish Frank on sight. To draw a bead on him and put a Winchester slug between his shoulders. For it was indicative of the true mental and moral make-up of Wiley Goss that this was how the picture of striking at anyone always framed up in his mind—seeing himself in the act of planting a bullet between their shoulders.

Like he had with Nels Madison. Like he had with that old fool, Packy Lane. Only, he'd had to shoot Packy through the head, because Packy was unsaddling at the time, and his horse between him and the gun, so that just his head was visible.

Wiley Goss was proud of that shot, but not so much so of the job he'd done on Nels Madison. After all, when you had a chance at a man with a back near as broad as a door, at less than two hundred yards, with that man standing still and you shooting from a rest, there was little excuse for not *killing* instead of merely wounding. With Nels Madison, decided Goss, he'd been too sure of himself, and so gone a little careless.

In saddle, Wiley Goss set his horse to the upward climb. He had no particular plan for locating Frank Dalmar. If indeed Frank was any place in these hills. It had to be just a matter of prowling and looking, hoping to cut Frank's trail somewhere. And this he did, so shortly after the thought came to him, he over-ran the sign before the significance of it struck home.

He cut back and from the saddle studied the hoof marks in the soft mat of duff and mold under the timber. In many ways Wiley Goss was nearer the animal than the hunter in man's attainment, but this did not preclude a certain wild cunning, a trail wisdom. Quite correctly he read this hoof sign as

chilled bacon grease in the frying pan sharpened his need until he considered the idea of raiding the grub sack and cooking a meal. But animal caution subdued this temptation. To build up the fire again might well attract attention and warn off Frank Dalmar. Besides, the fact that the coffee had still held warmth and that the grease in the frying pan had not fully hardened, told that Frank was not long gone. The trail was fresh, and now was the time to follow it.

Goss was certain this was Frank's camp. All logic pointed that way, with even the blankets adding proof. For Goss himself had slept under identical ones in the Double Diamond bunkhouse; gray-brown blankets, with two broad, black stripes running across the middle of them.

Goss made further survey of the camp. A trampled area showed where a horse had been picketed through the night, while the route Frank had left by this morning was a well marked trail, hoof sign showing that Frank had ridden both in and out of camp along it. It angled up the side of the ridge beyond the pocket, swinging as if to circle the ridge point.

Along with other thoughts, Wiley Goss had wondered how it would be when he finally came up with Frank. How would Frank react to the word that his father had returned him home? Would he listen willingly or would he resist all signs pointed to the latter attitude. For, reasoned Goss, he wouldn't have pulled out in the first place if he had any idea of returning.

Furthermore, Frank was armed, a fact which had to be considered carefully. Whether Frank had ever actually thrown a gun in a fight, Goss did not know. Whether he was even up to such a move was another controversial question. However, a loaded gun was a loaded gun and you never knew how the mind of the man behind it might work. So the smart move, reasoned Wiley Goss on running up with Frank, was to get a gun on him first and hold him under the drop while giving him the word. Then if he wouldn't listen to reason, persuade him according to Junior Dalmar's wish by laying a gun barrel across his head.

With this conclusion satisfactorily reached, Wiley Goss

Goss had crossed, Asbell hauled in the buckskin and had his good look around. After which he skirted the edge of the clearing, holding well into the timber. At the far end he picked up the trail once more.

On the same spot he'd used as a lookout yesterday afternoon, Frank Dalmar lounged at ease, fighting back drowsiness. Here the slant of the morning sun struck fully, bringing a warm comfort. Not used to sleeping on the ground, Frank had gone through a night that had been anything but restful. During the depth of its coldest hours he could have used another pair of blankets, for the chill had awakened him and held him in shivering discomfort. But now, fully warmed and relaxed, he found it a little difficult to keep his eyes open.

Reaching the lookout this morning, he'd made full survey of all the country he could cover. Nowhere did he sight anyone except down at Running M, where Rupe Hahn and Pearly Grimes showed. These two held no interest for him and he paid them no further attention. What he wanted, what he planned on, was to catch at their deadly trade the killer or killers his father and Bardo Sampson had turned loose across the range.

These were the ones he wanted to locate in their prowling, whoever they were. And when he did, he'd give them their own medicine. He'd give them no more mercy than had been shown Packy Lane and Nels Madison. He'd wage a one-man vendetta against Double Diamond. This he knew he had to do, if ever he wanted to hold up his head again in the company of honest men. Never particularly introspective, he now realized that unless he made this stand for decency and right, he'd never know another moment of peace with himself so long as he lived.

Besides all the other issues, there was Sue Vincent. Her friendship had been the finest thing Frank had ever known in all his life. Her home had ever been open to him, and many were the times, bitterly musing, had he contrasted its warmth and fine hospitality with the barren ugliness of his own.

To his father, Frank felt he owed nothing. Certainly there no longer existed for him any vestige of filial respect or affec-

"Didn't know it was your trail."

"Whose did you think it was?"

"Didn't know."

"Then why follow it?"

Any tension or uneasiness always whitened the sear on Wiley Goss's chin and pulled his lips even further from his rodent teeth. He was uneasy now, not only from the direction of Frank's questions, but from something he read in Frank's whole attitude and expression. This was a different Frank than he'd ever seen before.

Frank threw the question again.

"Why follow the trail, Goss? What were you aiming to do at the end of it—shoot somebody else in the back?"

This was a shot in the dark and intended so, but it struck home. Coming as it did so abruptly, it jarred and blurted a revealing answer out of Wiley Goss.

"Anything I do, is under orders. Your father's orders."

Well, here it was—here was admission. Dark suspicion now stark truth. Truth badgered out of a dull and brutal mind. The words rang in Frank's ears. "Your father's orders!" All along he had, of course, known this must be so. But, tragic as it had been in the knowing, somehow it was twice so when spoken aloud.

He brought his rifle fully to his shoulder, his glance cold along the sights.

"You dirty, murdering dog! At least you'll be looking at me when you get it!"

Here was what he had vowed to do, the thing that had brought him into these hills. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Wiley Goss saw the signs and recognized them. Frank was set to kill him—set to shoot him out of the saddle! With the realization, Goss acted, throwing himself headlong down slope and grabbing for his gun as he fell.

Behind him, the crash of Frank's rifle laid its flat echoes all across the hill slope.

To Frank it was incredible that he could have missed at this range. Yet he knew he had, knew that Wiley Goss's desperate

that perhaps a Big Five or perhaps a Running M hand wasn't responsible? Sure, that was it! Just make up his story and stick to it. With this comforting conclusion, Wiley Goss hauled his horse around and spurred it crashing down hill.

Link Asbell, following the trail of Wiley Goss, was almost directly beneath the high point when Frank Dalmar's rifle laid its hard snarl across the slope. At the sound he set the buckskin up short and swung in the saddle, listening and peering through the shadowed timber.

Came a second report, and a third, but these were revolver shots, blunt and thudding, lacking the high, hard rip of the rifle. On the heels of these there was a short silence, then the plunge of hoofs and the crash of hurried approach from above.

Asbell lifted the Winchester from the scabbard under his stirrup leather, flipped the lever back and forth. He saw the front legs and chest of the horse first, sight of its head and neck and its rider blocked off by low sweeping branches. Then horse and rider broke into the reasonable clear.

Asbell laid his challenge harshly.

"Stay so, Goss! Just as you are!"

For a second time within the space of short ~~minutes~~ ~~time~~ Goss found himself looking into the eye of a ~~man~~ ~~the~~ ~~and~~ whisper of panic, almost stilled, returned as a ~~gun~~ ~~was~~ ~~laden~~ ~~now~~ ~~with~~ ~~the~~ ~~knowledge~~ ~~of~~ ~~error~~ ~~and~~ ~~it~~ ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~far~~ ~~off~~. Again he went for his gun, while he ~~braced~~ ~~his~~ ~~back~~ ~~up~~ ~~rearing~~.

Link Asbell did not hesitate. ~~All~~ ~~the~~ ~~hand~~ ~~men~~ ~~were~~ ~~here~~. Kill or be killed. It ~~had~~ ~~been~~ ~~here~~ ~~and~~ ~~was~~ ~~in~~ ~~a~~ ~~world~~, these Saddleback Hill's and the ~~plain~~ ~~below~~. The ~~other~~ ~~side~~ ~~had~~ ~~written~~ ~~the~~ ~~rules~~, and the ~~game~~ ~~would~~ ~~not~~ ~~be~~ ~~played~~ ~~out~~ ~~that~~ ~~way~~.

Just as he turned the ~~shot~~ ~~from~~ ~~the~~ ~~moving~~ ~~hand~~ ~~and~~ ~~man~~ of Goss's horse crossed his ~~sight~~ ~~and~~ ~~he~~ ~~had~~ ~~not~~ ~~time~~ ~~to~~ ~~do~~ ~~the~~ ~~horse~~ ~~might~~ ~~have~~ ~~taken~~ ~~the~~ ~~bullet~~ ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~animal~~ ~~and~~ ~~it~~ ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~far~~ ~~off~~ down, though a ~~wispy~~ ~~of~~ ~~smoke~~ ~~was~~ ~~seen~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~distance~~ away. Beyond, ~~gun~~ ~~poised~~ ~~for~~ ~~a~~ ~~shot~~ ~~Wiley~~ ~~Goss~~ ~~was~~ ~~about~~ ~~to~~ ~~finish~~ ~~the~~ ~~move~~. ~~Smoked~~ ~~smoke~~ ~~and~~ ~~it~~ ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~far~~ ~~off~~.

through the center of his chest, he went out of his saddle in a loose, sliding fall.

His horse, doubly spooked now, whirled wildly off to one side, loose reins flying. These caught and tangled in a sapling pine and the tug of them brought the animal about, snorting and blowing and wild of eye.

Mechanically, Asbell swung the lever of his rifle, his attention narrowly on the sprawled bulk of Wiley Goss. As there was no move, he stepped from his saddle and tramped over for a closer look, then soon turned away. This man was thoroughly dead.

For a little time Asbell stood in bleak thought. Then his head tipped and he looked upward through the masking timber where the first shooting had sounded. What would he find up there? Certainly something ominous. Because, by his every look and move, Wiley Goss had displayed a desperate guilt.

Asbell calmed Goss's horse, tied it more securely. Then he went back into his own saddle and set the buckskin to the steep slope, back-tracking Wiley Goss's rushing descent. And at the end of this he found Frank Dalmar.

Sight of Frank's crumpled figure jolted Asbell heavily, for he had expected anything but this. Some other man, perhaps. But not Frank Dalmar. Why? The question hit him right between the eyes. Why should Frank Dalmar and Wiley Goss have shot it out? Both were Double Diamond. It didn't make sense. And now Frank lay dead. . . .

Or did he? There was the faintest of moans and the slight movement of one arm.

Asbell was quickly beside Frank, turning him over, marking the extent of his hurts. A bullet hole high in the right side of the chest, another in the right leg. A swelling and a deep cut just at the hairline in the middle of the forehead, where, in falling, Frank had plowed into a tree.

The chest wound was plainly the serious one. Between it and the leg wound Frank had already lost a lot of blood and was steadily losing more of it. And that had to be stopped. As easily as he could manage, Asbell got Frank's shirt off, tore

some of it in strips, made pads of the rest, and bandaged both wounds as best he knew how. And it was as he was finishing this that Frank's eyelids fluttered and lifted.

For a moment or two the eyes they uncovered were stunned and dull, peering upward without recognition or understanding. Then the veil of shock began to clear a little and Frank's lips moved.

"Asbell!" he mumbled. "You—how—what—?"

"It was Goss, Frank," Asbell said. "Remember—Wiley Goss."

Frank rolled his head slightly. "That's right. Sure—Wiley Goss. Damned—dirty dog, who needs killing. And I missed him—clean—at fifty feet. Don't know—how—I did. Water—I could use—some water. Thirsty—as hell."

"I'll try and locate some as soon as I get you tied up, Frank."

"My camp—just around the point. Plenty water—there."

Frank sighed and his eyes closed again.

A camp, Frank had said, just around the point. Asbell went looking for it. He went to his right, first, and there found Frank's tethered horse. So then he tried the other side and located the well-marked trail that led to the little basin.

Asbell judged the distance and the steepness of the slope. From where Frank lay it was not too far to his camp. It would, Asbell decided, be much easier on Frank if he carried him in, rather than try to get him across a saddle.

Frank was only semi-conscious as Asbell carefully hoisted him over a shoulder and made the carry to camp. Here he put him carefully down, smoothed out the pile of blankets and rolled him on to them. After which he rinsed the coffee pot at the spring and brought it back dripping. He sloshed a little water across Frank's face, trickled more of it between his lips. Frank gulped, stirred and came back to the world again. Asbell put an arm about him, lifted him up and let him drink deep.

As Asbell lowered him to the blankets again, Frank murmured his relief.

"That was good—good! I heard tell one time—there's no

THOROUGHLY RESTED by a full night of sleep in his own bed, Doc Jerome brought his buckboard to a stop in front of the Running M. ranchhouse and hopped spryly out. Mandy Madison stood on the porch to greet him, and she too showed evidence of a good rest. The tension of fatigue was gone from her face and her eyes were soft and clear, items which Doc did not miss.

"If I may say so, Mandy," he remarked cheerfully, "you're looking uncommonly fine this morning. Evidently all goes well with the patient?"

Mandy nodded, her lips quivering ever so slightly.

"He's conscious, Doctor. He spoke to me."

"Nol Why, the big, tough son-of-a-gun! Let's have a look at him. Where's Sue Vincent?"

"Sleeping. Do you know what she did, Doctor? She made me lie down last night, saying she would sit with Nels for a while. I went sound asleep and she left me so the whole night through, while she stayed awake to watch Nels. What can you do for a friend like that?"

"Just bless your luck in having one," Doc said.

Nels Madison was conscious, all right, and he showed a wan smile as Doc bent over him. Scolding with friendly affection, Doc got a mild opiate in him and by the time all was ready for a look at the wound and the placing of a fresh dressing, Nels was sound asleep.

Setting the final bandage, Doc straightened and spoke softly.

"Mandy, this man of yours has made me look like a wizard.

But I tell you straight, now that I know he's going to be as good as ever, the first time I looked him over I was mightily afraid you were on your way to widowhood. The Lord must love both you and Nels a heap."

"I prayed, Doctor," Mandy said simply.

Outside, speeding hoofs beat a fast approaching echo across the plain. Doc cocked his head, listening, then growled.

"Now what? I'm getting jumpy, for every time I hear fast traveling hoofs, I see visions of more like Nels. And they can't all be that lucky."

Doc hurried out and Mandy followed. Over at one of the corrals, Rupe Hahn showed and stood wondering. And the three of them watched Link Asbell come in fast on a sweating buckskin. He had his look at Doc's buckboard, then stepped from his saddle and turned toward the house.

Doc nodded and murmured, "I knew it!" He raised his voice. "Link—you're after me?"

"After you, Doc," came the curt answer. "And damn lucky to find you here. If you're done with Nels for a little time, we'll be riding."

"Who for, and where to?" Doc demanded.

Asbell jerked a thumb across his shoulder. "The Saddlebacks again. For Frank Dalmar."

"Frank Dalmar! You mean—you and Frank tangled?"

"No," Asbell said. "Frank and Wiley Goss."

"Be damned!" sputtered Doc. "A shootout?"

"That's it. A shootout."

"But—but Goss rides for Double Diamond. Why should he and Frank—?"

"I don't know," Asbell cut in. "At least not all of it. But I figure that can wait until later. First thing now is to get Frank fixed up so we can move him. I'll put a saddle on a bronc for you, Doc."

"Where's Frank hit, and how bad?"

Asbell indicated the two spots. "Both six-gun slugs."

"How about Goss," asked Doc, "didn't he get hit at all?"

Asbell hesitated, then laid the fact cold. "He got hit. He's dead."

"Be damned!" exclaimed Doc again. "Who'd ever have figured Frank that good with a gun?"

"Frank didn't kill Goss," Asbell said flatly. "I did. Now get your gear, Doc. We're riding."

At the corrals, Asbell explained briefly to Rupe Hahn.

"Better come along, Rupe. May need your help. And we'll need an extra bronc. We'll use a blanket pack between two horses to bring Frank in. Providing he's still alive."

They were soon ready. As Doc and Rupe headed out, Rupe leading the extra horse, Asbell swung over to the porch where Mandy Madison stood, watching it all gravely.

"Be all right if we bring Frank here, Mandy? There were a couple of things he said which hinted he could be on our side in this affair."

"Of course you can bring him here," Mandy answered. "He's a hurt human. The rest doesn't matter, Link."

Up in the brooding solitude of the Saddlebacks, Frank Dalmar was battling pain. The initial numbness caused by shock, was now wearing off, and the pain was now wild in him, running through him in long, convulsive waves. A thin groaning built up in his throat, but he fought it back and held it silent behind set teeth, while his eyes gazed at the cold sweat broke and ran down the set muscles of his face.

Out of his torment and weakness came a strange, cold and crazy sense of pride which said he should not be beaten while the pain whipped and punished him. In the silence he were going through some kind of trial which, if he could silently, would purify and render clean. The pain was not to wipe a stain from the family name.

The thought grew and grew in his mind until he became confused and disoriented. The pain piled up and raged savagely through him and he clenched his teeth and held back all sound.

Thirst hit him again and with his hands he reached for the coffee pot to him and then he turned to the water into his mouth. He drank it down and then he drank and chest and afterward he lay down and covered his face with a blanket over his head.

TOUGH SADDLERS
n him and daylight was gone and he was in darkness
more.

ne next he knew there were voices around him and hands
hold of him, gentle hands, yet hurting ones as they lifted
n up, then laid him down, then rolled him over and back
ain. Finally he was lifted and laid in a blanket that sagged
ke a hammoek. And there were horses close to him, so close
e could feel the body warmth of them on either side of him
and smell the raw pungence of their sweat.

But the pain was back again, pressing in massively, and
now he was too weak to fight it—too weak to give a damn one
way or the other. Stupor claimed him and he let everything
slide.

When, later, Link Asbell and Doc Jerome and Rupe Hahn
got back to Running M with a live man riding mummy-like
in a blanket slung between two horses, and a dead man across
the saddle of another, it was Tom Grant who came down off
the ranchhouse porch to meet them.

"Link," he said gravely, "our good world seems to have
gone crazy."

"Not the world, Tom," Asbell answered. "Just some of
those in it."

They carried Frank Dalmar into the bunkhouse and I
said to Rupe Hahn:

"I'll want hot water, Rupe—lots of it. And I mean—
Tell Mandy I'll need her, too. Nels is over the hump,
so she can spare a little time away from him. I got to go
lead again, and with the experience she had helping
Nels, she'll know what to do."

Rupe hurried out and Doc turned to Asbell. "What
Wiley Goss?"

"I'm taking him out and laying him down on Jo
mar's doorstep."

"No!" barked Doc sharply. "That wouldn't be s
smart at all. I'll take him into town with me, later.
word to Double Diamond for them to come and g
Asbell shook his head. "Which would leave Bi
turning the other cheek, and we're all done with

opened up to me a little. I told you he said Goss was the one who shot Packy Lane and Nels Madison. So I'm laying Goss right in Jonas Dalmar's lap and saying—'Here's your killer. How much did you have to pay him?'"

"You do that, you'll break things wide open."

"Things are wide open now. And with the proof I got from Frank, I'm going to get word through to Chris Hatfield and demand action. I'll want that affidavit of yours on Packy Lane, Doc. Where is it?"

"Charley Tunnison's got it. I still say you should stay away from Double Diamond headquarters. Else you'll be the next I'll be working on."

Asbell shrugged. "Never borrow trouble, Doc."

Tom Grant, watching and listening, spoke up.

"Now I think I'll ride out to Double Diamond with you, Link."

Asbell looked at him. "Why?"

"I need the ride," Tom said glibly.

"You've had a ride. No sense you getting into this thing."

Tom Grant waved a dismissing hand. "My friend, you waste your breath."

He was a solid man, red headed, with cool blue eyes and a ready grin.

"You ride with me, Cathy will give you hell," Asbell declared gruffly.

"That," retorted Tom Grant, his grin hard and sure, "is a base canard against my dear lady. She's not very big, that wife of mine, but she's got plenty of spunk. So she really would give me hell if I didn't ride with you. Let there be no more argument."

Link Asbell knew exactly what was in Tom Grant's mind. With him along, Double Diamond would hardly dare make openly at Asbell. That would be Tom Grant's danger and it was plain he would not be dissuaded in his intention.

"If you're going to be stubborn about it, we might as well head out," Asbell grumbled. "The wind's in your favor."

"No. This won't be as rough a job as it was when I last saw you. See that you don't go making a fool of me."

Canyon and a number of lesser clefts in the hill flank. Up there, too, at the extreme crest, frost would have already touched and made the air fine and great, and in the hill meadows cattle grazed and grew fat. But not his cattle. Not yet. However, they would be his, one of these days, when all the necessary preliminaries had been taken care of. Of these, the most immediate one was locating Frank and getting him back home before he spread some kind of mischief, before he talked where he shouldn't.

The possibility of this had begun to worry Jonas Dalmar. At first he'd been inclined to scoff at any idea of Frank turning against his own father, his own outfit. But since listening to Bardo's flatly expressed opinions on the matter, he wasn't so sure.

He had tried to figure what Frank's real intentions might be, where he could have gone. In the end, Bardo Sampson's opinion had made the most sense—that so long as Frank had taken blankets and grub, he would be holed up in a camp somewhere, most likely in the Saddlebacks, where good water was handy.

If this be so, then it was only a matter of time before he would show again. Either, as his fit of sulks wore off, he'd get sick of being alone, of sleeping on the ground and eating out of a frying pan and so come sneaking back to more comfortable quarters and decent cooking—either that, or Wiley Goss would locate him and bring him home.

Out on the sun-razed run of the plain a lift of dust showed, and Jonas Dalmar put his glance on this and held it so. As the tawny smudge approached, under it showed a pair of riders. Jonas Dalmar gave a grunt of satisfaction. Coming in from that direction, the two riders would, in all likelihood, be Frank and Wiley Goss.

That Wiley Goss! More animal than human, almost, Dalmar mused with satisfaction. Trail and sign wise and without vestige of scruple or conscience. So long as he was paid for it, he did whatever he was told to do, whether it be running a harmless errand, or going out and killing a man. Well, he'd left last night to find Frank and bring him back home, and

here he was already with the chore taken care of. As for Frank, Jonas Dalmar decided, he'd damn well get a talking to he'd date time from.

Dalmar's cigar had gone dead, and he used up three matches before he got it well going again. Now, with the smoke rolling rich and strong across his lips, he had another look at the approaching riders and saw that instead of two horses, there were three. And the third horse was at lead, with something tied across the saddle.

Dalmar pushed up from his chair, stepped to the edge of the porch for a better look. What he saw brought him no satisfaction. Neither of the riders was Wiley Goss, or Frank either. Furthermore, one of the ridden horses was the buckskin that was Link Asbell's favorite, and the other a long legged roan Tom Grant was partial to. Jonas Dalmar turned his head and lifted a thin yell.

"Bardol Sagel Get out herel!"

Bardo Sampson and Sage Wingo came over from the bunkhouse. Dalmar pointed.

"How do you see it?"

Bardo Sampson's heavy lids half veiled his protuberant eyes as he stared. Then he spat and swore.

"What the hell! That's Asbell and Tom Grant. What they got on the horse they're leadin'?"

"Bad news," Sage Wingo said. "That's the dun horse Wiley Goss rode out on last night!"

Jonas Dalmar took his half smoked cigar from his lips and threw it aside with a hard jerk of his arm.

"Sage," he droned, "you get out of sight. And with a gun!"

Sage Wingo went quickly back to the bunkhouse, then reappeared with a rifle in his hand and dodged quickly in back of the windmill tower.

Coming in on Double Diamond, riding high and watchful in his saddle, Link Asbell glimpsed the scurrying figure of Sage Wingo.

"You see that, Tom?" he asked.

"I saw," Tom Grant answered briefly. "You'll yet be glad I came along."

"Hell!" exploded Asbell mildly, "I am glad. I've been glad from the minute you suggested it. If I made like to hold you off it was only because I didn't want to saddle you with any of my troubles."

"We'll watch this—and everybody—close," Tom Grant said. They rode up to the ranchhouse, straight to where Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson stood. Asbell loosed the lead rope of the dun and tossed it down.

"Yours, Dalmar," he said bleakly.

Jonas Dalmar stared at the dun and its burden, turned out of his usual sneering, cock-sure aplomb, and he found white somewhat stupidly.

"Goss—he's dead?"

"What do you think?" Asbell retorted.

"Who—killed him?"

"I did."

"For what reason?"

"The best of reasons. Before he could kill me like he did Packy Lane and like he tried to do with Nels Matheson. You should know all about that, Dalmar."

"You're talking crazy," Dalmar said. "I don't know anything about it."

"That's not the way Frank tells it," Asbell said. "Frank!" Jonas Dalmar went very still. "What about Frank? Where is he?"

"Where he'll be well taken care of. Goss made a try at killing him, but didn't quite succeed. The hunter, Jonas Dalmar—sending a killer out after your own son. You overplayed your hand all around. You can't expect to gather you've had going on over by the time you're not moving any of that beef into the saddlebags. It's by the time Chris Hatfield's come you're not going to get anywhere. You'll be lucky you don't spend years. That could go for

Bardo Sampson's head showed, but he said not that right now there was

Asbell lifted his reins. "A dry chore, delivering Goss out here. My horse could stand a drink before I start back." He caught Tom Grant's eye and Tom nodded, almost imperceptibly. "Mine could, too," he said.

The watering trough was over by the windmill tower. They rode to it, but did not stop there. Instead, throwing their horses into a fast swing, they cut around the windmill tower, Asbell to the left, Tom Grant to the right. On the far side they trapped Sage Wingo between them.

With a watchful, cold-eyed man on either side of him, Sage Wingo kept his display of hostility mainly to what was mirrored on his face and what burned in his eyes.

"Well now," drawled Asbell with cold sarcasm, "just what would you be hunting out here, Sage? Crickets, maybe—or lizards? You don't need a rifle for them, so I'll just take that gun. Let's have it—butt first!"

Wingo, not obeying immediately, put his glance on Tom Grant and made a surly remark.

"What are you doing here? This is no mix of yours."

"It's like this," declared Tom cheerfully. "I happen to be one of those curious sons-of-guns. I wanted to see what you were doing back here." Abruptly his tone went crisp. "Better do what Link says, Wingo. Hand over that gun!"

Reluctantly, Wingo obeyed. Asbell gave an indicating nod.

"Around by the trough, where we can keep an eye on you."

At the watering trough they let their horses drink. When this was done, Asbell leaned well over and levered the cartridges from Sage Wingo's rifle into the trough, then dropped the rifle after them.

"I'd leave that gun so for a while, Wingo," he warned as he straightened up. "Just remember—these days, Big Five is shooting back!"

They rode out into the plain again, did Link Asbell and Tom Grant, and soon they were but distant, shrinking figures rapidly fading from view in the heat haze and the funneling dust.

On the porch of the Double Diamond ranchhouse, Jone Dalmar began to curse, softly and terribly.

Bardo Sampson, watching Asbell and Tom Grant drop into the vastness of the plain, turned to his partner and made growling comment.

"That does no good. They can't hear you. Or maybe it's that fine son of yours you're thinking about?"

The curses frittered out in Jonas Dalmar's throat. He nodded.

"The treacherous whelp!" he raged. his tone thick and savage. "Selling me out. Turning against me. Me—his own father!"

Bardo Sampson considered a moment, then shrugged.

"If Frank's talked, then he's talked. That's all there is to it."

"No!" rapped Dalmar. "That's not all there is to it. So far, he's talked only to Asbell. And so long as he don't get a chance to talk to anybody from Hatfield's office, his talk can't hurt us too much."

"But he'll get that chance," Bardo said. "Asbell's bringing Hatfield's office in on this thing."

"By that time," Dalmar said ominously, "Frank could have a change of heart. I think he will!"

"What makes you think so?"

"I'll find him and I'll persuade him."

"First you got to find him. You heard what Asbell said. Wiley Goss got lead into Frank."

"But not enough, apparently, to shut him up, once and for all." There was a thin ferocity in Jonas Dalmar's tone. His black eyes were glass hard, and there was no mercy in him for anyone.

"I can't figure Frank and Goss tangling in a shootout," Bardo said. "You sent Goss out to bring Frank in, not kill him. Wonder what happened?"

"Whatever it was, it doesn't matter now," Dalmar said harshly. "Goss is dead, so he'll never tell. And Asbell said Frank was being taken care of. That means he's either at Big Five or Running M. So—I'll find him. While I'm about that, here's what you do. You get Doc Jerome's affidavit from Tunison."

TOUGH
mean—pay him the thousand he's asking?"
—hell! Pay him nothing. Jam a gun against that dam
s teeth and make him come across—or else! It com
Bardo—there's one big mistake we been making."

do blinked. "How's that?"
ying to pussy-foot our way through a deal as big
ne. Hiring others to do what we should have been doing,
elves. Like him." Dalmar indicated the jack-knifed figure
Wiley Goss. "And he didn't do anything right."
That's so," Bardo admitted. "What do you make of Tom
nt, riding in here and backing Asbell's band the way he
?"

Jonas Dalmar was getting a fresh cigar alight. The ferocity
as still in him, but it was a banked fire, now, awaiting fu-
re use.

"Mister Grant made a mistake, there. So he'll be taken
care of, too—all in good time." Dalmar turned and lifted a
call. "Wingo!"

Sage Wingo had just dredged his rifle from the depths of
the watering trough. Carrying the dripping weapon, he
louched over to the porch.

Jonas Dalmar surveyed him bleakly, while the old caustic
bite of sarcasm came through.

"What the hell did you think I told you to get that gun
for? To use as a crutch?"

Sage Wingo flushed. "I couldn't do anything. They had me
between them."

"Not when they first rode in," reminded Dalmar thinly.
"Maybe you just don't want to draw down on Asbell? Maybe,
in spite of the beating he gave you in the Imperial, you hold
kind thoughts for him? Or maybe—" and here Dalmar really
swung the lash, "when he gave you that going over he so
tened up your spine, let all the salt out of you. Yeah, maybe
that's it!"

Long had Sage Wingo rode for Double Diamond a
known a real fidelity to its interests, even though, more th
once in the past, he'd felt the bite of Jonas Dalmar's vitri
tongue. But never had it cut as deeply as now, and more

justly. In Sage Wingo, sudden rebellion swelled, and he made pointed retort.

"What have you got to talk about? I didn't see you spit in anybody's eye. And if you think my spine has gone soft, you got my permission to try and prove it—any damn time you want!"

Jonas Dalmar was startled. Caution whispered. He shrugged.

"Let it go." He jerked a nod at Wiley Goss's horse and its grisly burden. "Take that off somewhere and get rid of it."

The will to argue was still on the loose in Sage Wingo. "Digging a grave is a stiff chore for one man."

"Who said anything about a grave?" charged Jonas Dalmar. "Just take it somewhere and get rid of it."

Sage Wingo stared at Jonas Dalmar, a strange light forming in his eyes. Then, without further word, he picked up the rein on Wiley Goss's horse and led it over to the corrals. Here he caught and saddled a horse for himself, and with the other at lead, rode east into the plain.

Bardo Sampson, finished spinning up a cigarette, spoke with considerable emphasis.

"Jonas, just sure as hell, that damned nasty tongue of yours is going to get you killed, one of these days. You had no call to tie into Sage that way. He's been a mighty good man for us, and whipsawing him like that could easy make him a poor one."

Jonas Dalmar shrugged.

"He's a little sore now, but he'll get over it. He knows where his bread and butter lie. He'll come to heel like any other dog."

THROUGHOUT THE dry season of the year the waters of Burro Creek made reasonable flow down the flank of the Saddle-backs, but shortly after striking the thirsty earth of the plain, such flow frittered out and was lost under reaches of alkali whitened gravel which stretched in a long easterly and southerly curve between steep, raggedly eroded cut-banks of clay and sand and sifting earth. This part of the water-course was known as Burro Wash, or, simply, "The Wash." And though it lay parched and dry during the late summer and early fall season, winter often saw it a wild, silt-stained torrent.

Here and there along its banks, clumps of sour willow clung tenaciously, with now and then a small stand of locust trees showing a slightly loftier crest and casting a degree of thin, warm shade.

Near one such stand of locusts, winter's charging flood had deeply undercut the south bank of the wash, and it was to this spot that Sage Wingo brought the body of Wiley Goss. Dismounting, he took Goss's horse by the bridle and swung it close up against the cut bank. Here he loosed the rope ties which held the dead man across the saddle and with a quick lift of a shoulder, slid him free.

After moving the horse into the clear, Wingo dragged the body well up under the bank's overhang. After which he climbed out of the wash and began stamping and gouging at the rim of it, breaking off chunks of earth. At first the going was slow, for this was hard, parched surface earth. But presently, when he broke through this hard surface, the earth

moved easier until, of a sudden, a whole great section broke and began to slide.

Wingo scrambled clear, and when the last of the earth had finished sliding, the bank of the wash was sheer, all under-cut gone. Where this had been, a heavy mound of earth lay along the edge of the gravel. Beneath this mound, Wiley Goss had found burial.

Leading both horses, Sage Wingo tramped along to the clump of locust trees, here to squat on his heels and twist up a thin cigarette, while letting his brooding thoughts run. There was no real kindness in Sage Wingo, and certainly no slightest vestige of nobility. Therefore he would have found it highly difficult, if not impossible to explain why he had gone to the bother of achieving even the roughest sort of burial for Wiley Goss. Certainly it was not because of any personal regard. For he correctly saw Wiley Goss as just a surly, shoot-in-the-back killer, ready and willing to ply his trade at any time for a price.

Not that he, Sage Wingo, owned any particular scruples against killing, for there were several such affairs along his own back trail. But in a strange, introspective, lone-wolf sort of way, he held to a certain code of decorum. Perhaps, far back in his early youth, some impression of rightness had been set deeply enough to last through the years. Again, it might have been sheer superstition at work. At any rate, as Wingo saw it, when a man died in the interests of the cause he was working for, he deserved burial. And when Jones Dalmar had so callously denied this right to Wiley Goss, it awakened a harsh and deepening resentment in Sage Wingo. Now he was searching for the answer to the question that resentment had set up.

Gaunt and angular as *he* was, *ready* *only* with his great, round, shaggy head, *with* *the* *dark*, *yellowish* *face*, he smoked one cigarette to a *last* *the* *best* *of* *the* *others* while he got his disturbed thoughts in line.

Many times had he *known* *the* *weight* *of* *Jones* *Dalmar's* *barbed* *tongue*, and had paid it *his* *attention* *until* *today*,

"That Wingo," he complained nasally, "he's getting a mite uppity. Answering back. He needs to be kicked into line."

"Oh, sure," Bardo said wearily. "Kick 'em into line—beat 'em over the head. Sneer and snarl at them. That makes them like you better, makes them more faithful and harder working. Jonas, you never will learn, I guess."

Well out in the plain away from Double Diamond, Tom Grant drew rein, settled back in his saddle and showed Link Asbell a hard, tight grin.

"Now in one way I enjoyed things, back yonder. But I got to admit that until we had Wingo between us there were several creepy little creeps crawling up and down my backbone. It's bad enough to ride in on a man with a gun when you can see him. But when you do it on one you know is there, but can't see, that kind of stretches things. So now, my friend, I'm leaving you and getting on home where that pint-sized wife of mine can comfort my jangled nerves."

"Your jangled nerves!" scoffed Asbell. "You never had a nerve in your life." Sobering, he added, "You realize, of course, you didn't make any friends for yourself back there?"

Tom Grant waved an airy hand. "They never were what you'd call friends of mine. Don't you fret none about me; save all that sort of thing for yourself. Yours and Nels Madison's are the hides Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson want to see hung on the corral fence. Luck was riding with you today. Don't push that luck too far."

"Any luck riding with me today was wrapped up in your own ornery carcass," Asbell retorted. "And I'm going to worry about you."

Again Tom Grant waved the airy hand. "Never worry, cowboy. Gives you wrinkles. Love and kisses."

With another cheerful grin he reined away, heading homeward.

Alone, Link Asbell cut for the main plains road and struck it a couple of miles south of Running M, shortly thereafter meeting with Doc Jerome on his way back to town. Asbell hauled to a stop and Doc rode his brake and checked his team.

"Well?" Asbell inquired.

"Well, yourself?" Doc retorted. "What happened at Double Diamond?"

Asbell shrugged. "I delivered Wiley Goss to Jonas Dalmar like I said I would."

"Humph!" growled Doc. "You make it sound too simple. Well, I must say I'm relieved to see you still all in one piece." "You really expected otherwise?"

"These days I don't know what to expect. But nothing would surprise me too much. All I know for sure is, that if things keep on the way they are, I might as well set up a hospital at Running M."

"How's Frank Dalmar?"

"Minus two .45 slugs and a lot of blood. Which leaves him a bit puny."

"I got some questions I'd like to ask him, Doc. How soon can I talk to him?"

"Any time he's awake. When I left he was sleeping, with Sue Vincent holding his hand. Between her and Mandy Madison, I got me a couple of mighty good amateur nurses. I hope they're still available when I have to go to work on you."

"Well now!" charged Asbell drily. "You sure are a fine, comforting fellow to have around."

"I'm a realist," declared Doc. "A realist who is long overdue at his office. If I don't show up there pretty soon, some of my old regulars, like Mrs. Hosmer with her aches and pains and Tim Deale with his stomach misery, will be hunting professional advice and sympathy elsewhere, Giddap!"

Doc knocked off the brake and urged his team to movement.

When Link Asbell rode in at Running M, Sue Vincent was standing at the door of the bunkhouse. At sight of him she exclaimed and came a little way toward him, then paused, watching him, her eyes big and dark, a shadow of strain slowly ebbing from her face. Asbell stepped from his saddle.

"What is it, Sue. Don't tell me Frank has—?"

She shook her head quickly, drew a deep breath.

How much he's willing to tell, to me and to Sheriff Hatfield."

She thought about this, then slowly nodded.

"It is the right thing, of course. Bringing in Sheriff Hatfield's office to handle things, I mean. But what you want of Frank is rather awful, too. Asking him—expecting him to turn against his own father."

"It is," agreed Asbell. "My feeling though, is that he's already turned. It can be a pretty brutal world for some of us, Sue."

In renewed silence they moved on through a sundown world which soon became one of steadily deepening dusk, and afterward, when they rode in at Big Five they found Hughie Logan and Dutch Stauber waiting by the corrals, openly anxious.

"High time you showed up, Mister Asbell," said Hughie in gruff but plainly relieved sarcasm. "You tell others where to be and what to do and when to be back, but leave everybody up in the air over your own doings. I'm beginning to wonder if you're worth worryin' about."

"Now—now!" Asbell drawled. "It's just that I've been busy. I got plenty to worry about, myself. Among other things—your worthless hides."

Sue understood the feelings of these men, one for the other, under their half serious, half bantering words, and a glimmer of moisture shone in her eyes as her glance ran over them.

"You're all wonderful," she said shakily. Then she was quickly out of her saddle and running to the kitchen door and into the cheery lamp-glow of the room beyond. Here Rosa Diaz moved among the fragrant vapors of her cooking. She looked at Sue with some uncertainty, then, glimpsing what was in Sue's eyes, opened wide her generous arms.

"Nanita miol!" she gulped.

Sue hugged her, mingling a few tears with some breathless endearments. Afterward, wiping her eyes, she exclaimed:

"If ever I'm cross with you again, Rosa—may I be horse-whipped! Now I want loads of hot water for a bath, and then supper right here in our own kitchen."

in the deepening dark by the corrals, Link Asbell told
 story of his day to Hughie Logan and Dutch Stauber.
 like all of it except you hauling Goss out to Double
 mond," decided Hughie. "That wasn't playing it smart.
 could have got yourself killed."
 Not while Tom Grant rode with me."
 "Tom's the pure quill," Hughie conceded. "Just the same,
 wasn't smart."

"Still worth the risk," insisted Asbell. "I learned thing
 one is that Jonas Dalmar is worried. Like he'd played a hand
 badly and was beginning to realize it."
 "How do you figure the shooting between Frank Dalmar
 and Wiley Goss?" Dutch Stauber asked. "Why should Goss
 have gunned Frank?"

Asbell shrugged.
 "I don't know, Dutch. Goss was a little wild-eyed when he
 came stampeding through the timber and bumped into me.
 Like a man who'd been pushed into something he hadn't ex-
 pected. Like maybe Frank had thrown down on him first,
 and he had to shoot back to keep from having his own head
 shot off. I'll know more when I get a chance to talk to Frank.
 Now how was it with you? What happened in town?"

"Not a thing," Dutch reported briefly. "All I got out of it
 was a full day of loafing."
 "Same with me," Hughie Logan said. "I did a lot of riding
 but saw nothing that meant anything. It's true Double D
 mond has a gather started on their back range, but it's no
 big one yet, and there were no signs of it being about
 move."

"That could come later, when they've made certain
 other things," Asbell said.

"Such as—?" hinted Hughie.

"You guess," Asbell suggested. "That's what I'm do-
 lot of."

He ate with Hughie and Dutch and old Cuff Tilton
 went into the ranch office to smoke an after-supper ci-
 and do some quiet thinking. He lay well back in his
 chair, all his muscles sag and soften, so that some

fatigue might drain out and ease replace it. It had been another long and momentous day, and now, for the first time, he made careful reflection of the grimmest part of it, his shoot-out with Wiley Goss.

Concerning the affair he knew a strange sense of objective detachment. For the violence had been quick and savage, with a man reacting more by instinct than by conscious thought—the instinct for personal survival. There had been no time to consider it before hand, no chance to assess the possibilities or probabilities of such a meeting. It was something that had literally exploded in his face, and he had instinctively killed to keep from being killed.

Now, as he rebuilt in his mind those few wild moments and considered their deadly result, he wondered if he should know any real feeling of regret or depression. And had to admit he did not. Maybe this was so because he had never viewed life from any other angle than one of hard reality. Things were, or they were not. Things happened, or they did not. And a man had to do what his own personal code of behavior called for.

If he accepted a responsibility, then he did what he had to do to live up to it and make it work. Maybe, Asbell mused, if Wiley Goss had possessed even one redeeming trait he might know some slight regret. But Goss was a two-legged animal, a conscienceless, cruel, dry-gulching killer, and in wiping him out it was as though he had merely stamped on the head of a rattlesnake. So, unalterably honest with himself, Asbell had to admit now to only a feeling of relief that Goss was dead.

He smoked one cigarette to ash and was building another when the inner door of the office opened and Sue Vineent came in. She was spick and span in fresh blouse and divided skirt and her hair hung loose and soft over her shoulders while she brushed the dampness of her bath from the edges of it. Her cheeks were clear, her eyes soft and rested.

Had any slightest twinge of remorse been in Link Asbell over the killing of Wiley Goss, it would have left him at this moment. For his every act was in the interests of this slim,

ing girl, and he knew that no matter what future events
t demand, he'd back away from none of them.
he exuberance of physical well-being was in her.
i feel like a brand new person," she exclaimed. "Come
supper with me, Link."

He pulled to his feet, explaining. "I ate with the boys. But
don't think another cup of coffee would founder me."
He stood for a moment, looking down at her, and the warm
sweetness of her clothed her like a fragrance. It was on his
tongue to tell her that for him there was no other loveliness
n all the world to compare with her own, but somehow the
words wouldn't come. So long had he been reticent about
this, the habit now held him in silence. But what he felt lay
unmistakably in his eyes, and she saw and understood, and a
flush stole through her cheeks and she turned to the door,
her words faintly breathless.

"Come along, then. I'm ravenous."

The next hour was as pleasant a one as Asbell could recall
in many a day. He sat across the kitchen table from Sue Vir-
cent, missing no word or look or gesture as she and Rosa
chattered back and forth, with Rosa hovering fondly, quick
to their every want. Tonio Diaz squatted in a corner, nursing
a husk cigarette, grinning and nodding. The comfort of un-
derstanding had returned to this household and for the
moment at least, the outer world, with its grimness and
threat, was very far away.

It was a magic moment that could not last. Abruptly Sue
was on her feet, exclaiming.

"I'm being horribly selfish! Mandy is over at Running M
alone, with Nels and Frank to worry about. I've got to go
back. Rosa, come help me pack the few things I'll need."

Asbell went out to the corrals and caught and saddled, bo
for Sue and for himself. He led the horses over to the pa
entrance, and when Sue came out, took the little bundle
belongings from her and tied it behind her saddle. Side
side they jogged off through the starshine, and the night w
from the Saddlebacks met them and held them silent with
invisible pressure.

At Running M, sound of their approach brought Pearly Grimes out of a pocket of deep shadow by the corrals. Pearly had a Winchester across his arm and he indicated direction with the gun while giving brief explanation.

"Heard a horse blow out yonder a while ago. I'm mindin' what you said, Link. Throw a shot at anybody who don't look right. So I been listenin' and watchin'."

"Quite right, Pearly," Asbell approved. He stood high in his stirrups for a moment, searching the night. But the darkness told nothing, so he stepped down and moved over to the bunkhouse with Sue. Rupe Hahn met them at the door.

"How is he, Rupe?" murmured Sue.

"Still sleeping, ma'am," Rupe answered.

The lamp on the bunkhouse table had been turned down. Sue lengthened the wick to a brighter glow, then moved to the bunk where Frank Dalmar lay. She leaned over and laid a hand on his forehead, while a brooding gentleness softened all her features. Watching, a gusting disturbance swept through Link Asbell and he turned to the open door, a thread of harshness running through his words.

"Looks like he's set for the night. I'll be back tomorrow to hear what he has to say for himself."

He was swiftly into the night, then, and across it to his horse and once again in the saddle. Old Pearly Grimes' patient tone came to him through the dark.

"Ride smart, boy. There ain't no tellin', any more."

No, thought Asbell a little savagely, putting his horse to the town trail—there was no telling. Particularly where the vagaries of a woman's mind and heart were concerned.

He couldn't get rid of the vision of the brooding gentleness that had shown on Sue Vincent's face when she leaned over Frank Dalmar. . . .

Well back in the dark from Running M headquarters, Jonas Dalmar had sat gaunt and hunched in his saddle, glance fixed on the lights of the ranch. He had been considerably closer not long before, close enough to clearly mark the different items of activity going on about the place. Such as Mandy Madison showing against the light of the open door of the

ranchhouse, then showing again at the bunkhouse door and going in there for a little time before returning to the ranchhouse.

Obviously, she had not gone into the bunkhouse because her husband was in there. Nels Madison would be in his own bed, in the main ranchhouse. But another wounded man could be in the bunkhouse. Frank could be in there. How badly hurt, Jonas Dalmar had no idea. He could only go on what Link Asbell had said when delivering the body of Wiley Goss to Double Diamond. Then, Asbell had said that Frank was doing all right.

Actually, it was not the seriousness of Frank's wounds that concerned Jonas Dalmar so much as it was what Frank could have told, and what he might still tell. But how to handle that concern?

The only certain way was to get Frank home. Either that or close his mouth by grimmer means. Right now, however, Dalmar knew neither course was possible. For, while closer in a little ago, some foreign scent had reached his horse through the night and caused the animal to blow sharply. Immediately after, Pearly Grimes had stepped from the bunkhouse, a rifle in his hand. Whereupon, Jonas Dalmar had prudently reined away to this more distant spot, knowing renewed frustration. Plainly, Running M was alert and on guard.

Now, as he watched and wondered, Dalmar heard the faint tempo of hoofs across the earth, coming in from the north and east. A little later, in that pale yellow lamp glow at the bunkhouse door, he saw still another feminine figure, with a tall rider beside her. Recognition was instinctive as well as visual.

The Vincent girl—and Link Asbell!

If, before, Jonas Dalmar had entertained any slightest uncertainty as to his son's whereabouts, such no longer existed. Previously viewed activity about the Running M bunkhouse, and now the arrival of Sue Vincent and Link Asbell, confirmed Frank's presence beyond reasonable doubt.

Carrying no other satisfaction than this with him, Jonas Dalmar reined about and headed back to Double Diamond.

FOUR MEN RODE the plain this night, and with them rode their inscrutable destinies.

Sage Wingo had carried Jonas Dalmar's order to the crew on the back range, only because the word exactly suited his purpose. For it was virtual guarantee that none of the crew would show up at the ranch unexpectedly and so interfere with his plans. There had been some grumbling over the order, but an order it was, and so would be obeyed. With this fact established, Wingo returned to headquarters.

Coming in on the place through the darkness, he held his horse to a walk, for he hoped, if possible, to accomplish by stealth what he was about. However, should force or ruthless action be needed, they would be used. For his mind was made up on two points. This night he was leaving Double Diamond for good, and the contents of a certain canvas sack were going with him.

The ranch was quiet, the only light visible being in the cookshack, signifying that Joe Orr, the cook, was on hand. Which offered small cause for worry, as Joe Orr had slight interest in anything that went on about the ranch outside the limits of his immediate domain, the cookshack and the cubby in back, where he slept.

From talk he'd heard between Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson earlier in the day, after Link Asbell and Tom Grant had paid grim visit to Double Diamond with the body of Wiley Goss, it was Sage Wingo's feeling that both were considering business of some sort that would take them away from headquarters during the night. If this be so now, then

what he was intent on would be simple enough. He would handle matters so silently and quickly, no one would even know he'd returned here, and loss of the money could go unnoticed for days. And when the loss was found out, who actually would have proof of what?

Wingo left his horse at the far edge of the corrals and came in on foot, carefully prowling, keening the night with every straining sense. All was still, all empty, except for that light in the cookshack. The shadowy outline of the buckboard Jonas Dalmar drove most of the time when moving about the range, stood in its accustomed place at the end of the saddle shed. But, Wingo knew, there were times when Dalmar still took to the saddle, and on a hunch, he checked on this. He slipped into the saddle shed, struck a match, and by this brief flicker of light, looked over the racks. Both Jonas Dalmar's and Bardo Sampson's saddles were gone.

Wingo pinched out the match and headed boldly across the interval to the ranchhouse. There wasn't, he exulted, a thing to worry about. In another fifteen minutes he'd be on his way, set for a long ride and a prosperous one.

From an opposite angle, a second rider closed in on Double Diamond, tight-held in the grip of wicked temper. It had always been Jonas Dalmar's belief, his code for survival, that if you applied purpose and ruthless action in proper proportion to any problem, then you must inevitably succeed. Which had been his feeling about this range coup he'd so long planned on.

It seemed, however, that there were various imponderables that could loom up when least expected, and so retard, if not completely upset the most carefully considered plan. Mainly, he decided morosely, this was because you could never fully control the actions and minds of others. Somehow, other men never completely fulfilled the parts assigned to them. And you could never fully know any other mind but your own.

Not even the mind of your own son. And if a man couldn't count on the support of his own son, what could he count on?

Considering these things as he rode, Jonas Dalmar now realized where he had made his greatest mistake. This thing

he was now attempting, this dream of range conquest, was something he should have gone at thirty years or better ago. Back when the juices of the good, vigorous years still ran strongly in him. Back when he could have done for himself the several things he now had to depend on others to do.

What matter if Mike Vincent had been alive, then? The same ruthless purpose he was now committed to, would have handled Vincent. A rifle shot from cover would have been just as deadly then, as now. Yes, he should have struck when his arm was young and strong, not when the weight of age was on it, as now.

But always in his makeup was an angle of behavior he had liked to believe was his greatest strength—the ability to scheme, to out-guess the other fellow, along with the patience to do these things, whether it be in a poker game or in any of life's more serious conflicts. Now he grudgingly wondered if what he had considered as strength, wasn't really weakness?

A time or two in the past, when some inkling of this had tugged at his thinking, he had branded his sly footing around as sensible caution. Tonight, however, in the most honest period of self-scrutiny he'd ever indulged in, he questioned himself more ruthlessly.

Where did honest caution leave off and fear begin?

The question lay in his mind as the bitterness of bile might in the throat. For it was a question which led inevitably to another.

How long did a man have to live to discover that he was basically a bully and a coward? Was his habit of biting sarcasm, the ever-ready venom of his tongue, merely a shield he'd built up across the years to cover up such weaknesses?

Lost in such dismal thoughts, Jonas Dalmar came in on headquarters at a shuffling jog, and was swinging past the ranchhouse to the corrals when he heard the soft jar of a closing door.

Dalmar hauled sharply up. Someone had either just gone into, or come out of the ranchhouse. Who would it be? Not Bardo Sampson, for Bardo would be in town, running down that affidavit of Doc Jerome's. And no one else besides Bardo

8
himself—and Frank, when Frank was home—had the
at to prowl that house. Now someone else had done, or
s intent on doing it. But 'who? In these uncertain times,
ere was no telling.

Before starting on his ride this night, Jonas Dalmar had
uckled on his old belt gun. Now he drew the weapon and
aned forward in his saddle, peering into the deep gloom
eneath the overhang of the porch. Were his eyes tricking
him, or was there the vague outline of someone half-crouched
beside the door? He threw his challenge harshly.

"Who is it? You—by the door—speak up?"
Sage Wingo held a weighty canvas sack in one hand, a
drawn gun in the other. He recognized both the voice and
the gaunt, angular outline of that mounted figure against the
star-shine. Jonas Dalmar!

Silently, Wingo railed against his luck. Given just another
minute or two, he'd have been out and gone. But Dalmar, he
would have to ride in at this exact moment! Except for the
money sack he held, Wingo might have tried to bluff it out,
to figure some sort of excuse for having been in the ranch-
house. But no amount of talk could explain away the money-
"Wingo lifted his gun, steadied it in line with the mounte-
gure.

Jonas Dalmar's challenge hit out again, pulling high
pitched, and thin.

"God damn it—name yourself! Or I shoot!"
Sage Wingo waited no longer. He fired a single shot w
deadly care. Wiped out by the hard, rolling smash of W
gun, was Jonas Dalmar's last mortal gasp. Then that ga
bitter figure that had loomed against the stars, toppled
the black shadows which lay close to the earth. And J
Dalmar's horse, under empty saddle, spun away, spooked
wild.

As the echoes of Wingo's shot frittered out, a muffle
of alarm sounded in the cookshack and the figure of Jo
showed in the lighted doorway. Sage Wingo threw a
shot which thudded into the cookshack wall, a yard fr
door. Joe Orr ducked from sight as abruptly as he l

peared, letting go another muffled yell, this one tailing off into scared profanity.

Sage Wingo came off the porch and past the still figure huddled down there in the earth's blackness. He paid no attention to the riderless horse snorting and milling in the nearby dark, but circled the corrals to where his own horse waited. He stuffed the sack of money into his saddlebags, buckled these securely, then went into the saddle and wheeled away, putting his horse to a run.

He held to this for only a little distance, however, as realization came that things were still all right, still all in his favor. What if he had killed Jonas Dalmar? The damned old pirate had long needed killing! And who could say that it was Sage Wingo who had pulled the fatal trigger?

No living man saw him, or heard his voice. And who could say but what Jonas Dalmar had died in retaliation for the killing of Packy Lane and the wounding of Nels Madison? Yes, who indeed could say that someone on the other side of the fence had not thus evened matters?

The more he thought of it, the more securely convinced Sage Wingo became that he had nothing to worry about. There was no need of riding back trails, of dodging anyone, of riding fast and far. He could take his time, go and come as he pleased. Because no one could point a finger at him with proof.

Out of the surly, dark, close-held depths of the man came a surge of emotion, strange and stimulating. It pulled him up, quickened him, made him feel big and powerful. For, he had long taken harsh thrown orders from Jonas Dalmar, had endured the biting sarcasm and venom of that bitter tongue, and been servile to that unrelenting, searing domination. But no longer would this be so.

Now, Jonas Dalmar was dead. And it had been such a simple thing. Just a single, carefully thrown bullet. And when that bullet struck, the slave was no longer the slave, but the master. Yes, Jonas Dalmar was dead, while he, Sage Wingo, was alive, with a lot of solid money riding in his saddlebags. And no one the wiser!

The whole thing, decided Wingo, was like a long due pay-off. Like a toting up, a balancing of one side against the other. Which was another good thought. For it left a man free to ride without feeling he'd left an unpaid debt behind—a debt of vengeance, or of getting even. Which was a good way to leave a range. For if a man left with things otherwise, if he left before he was even-up with everyone, then always would there ride with him a nagging realization of things unfinished.

This line of thought, while it had first brought an exultant satisfaction, now led to a realization which dulled somewhat the fine edge of Wingo's buoyant mood. For if he were to head directly out of this part of the country tonight, he'd certainly leave behind a big debt of unpaid vengeance. The one he owed Link Asbell!

It was a debt of long amassing, starting the first time he and Asbell met, when they looked each other up and down, formed their opinions, made their judgments. In Asbell's eyes he had seen the forming of a strong and scathing distaste. And from that moment the smoldering coals of dislike and animosity had burned in Sage Wingo.

Nothing that had happened since had in any way lessened that fire of enmity. Just the opposite was true. That first dislike had long since become a solid, enduring hatred, a hatred particularly virulent since the night in Ben Dillon's Imperial bar not so long ago, when Asbell had beat him savagely, man to man.

Added to this were the happenings back at Double Diamond headquarters, earlier this day. Caught between Asbell and Tom Grant, he had had to surrender his rifle, and then been forced to watch Asbell lever the weapon empty into the watering trough, and, as a final insulting gesture, drop the gun into the trough after the cartridges.

So, at this moment, Sage Wingo knew the conviction that no matter where he rode, or how far, he'd never be free of a nagging discontent unless he settled his debt of hate with Link Asbell. However, it was something that shaped up as far from easy, and he had to think on it carefully, figuring how and when.

He always thought better on such things with a shot or two of whiskey under his belt, so, where he'd been riding directly west, intent on hitting the Oakdale freight and stage road several miles south of town, he now reined north and west, where the lights of town were distant yellow pinpoints in the night.

Coming into town from Running M, Link Asbell rode down Center Street to the Prairie House, where he dismounted and tied. As he climbed to the porch, two things reached him. A whiff of pipe smoke and drawling, faintly amused comment by Husk Greeley.

"Evenin', Link. Don't tell me you're another one come to inquire Charley Tunnison's health?"

Asbell paused, peering along the porch to where Husk, in an old rocking chair, was a faintly stirring bulk in the gloom.

"What gives you that idea, Husk?"

Husk's amusement ran into a dry chuckle.

"Well, it's like this. Supper time is long past, and right now there ain't nobody in the hotel outside our eminent lawyer who might interest you. Call it deduction, and there you are."

"You're the smart one," Asbell applauded. "From the way you spoke, somebody else has already been in to see him."

"Was," Husk nodded, puffing audibly, lips smacking faintly about the stem of his pipe. "Bardo Sampson. He left, just a little ago. Guess his visit wasn't no ways pleasant, for some reason. When he came out he like to stamped his boot heels through my floor. Just like Jonas Dalmar did when he was in the other day. Dalmar was madder than a hornet."

Asbell considered thoughtfully, while spinning up a smoke.

"Why do you suppose a visit with Tunnison makes people mad?"

"Now I wouldn't know," Husk said. "But from what I hear, this whole cussed range is getting kind of wringy. For all I know, Tunnison's mad, and it's ketchin'."

"If he is and it is, I'll try and fight clear. What room?"

"Seven," informed Husk. "You want to go soothe his fevered brow—fly to it!"

About to move into the hotel, Asbell had another thought.

"Where did Bardo Sampson go after he left here?"

"Up street somewhere. Might have stopped in the Imperial."

When Asbell knocked on the door of Room Seven, the first response was a considerable period of silence. Finally, after a second knock, Charley Tunnison answered, a definite note of wariness in his voice.

"Who is it?"

Asbell told him, and was summoned in, in a tone which, if not exactly cordial, was at least somewhat relieved.

Tunnison was propped up in bed, the lamp on the bedside table throwing a muted yellow radiance. The lawyer spoke past his face-muffling bandages, faint sarcasm threading his words.

"This surprises me, Asbell. I didn't think you cared a damn."

"I don't," returned Asbell bluntly. "In fact, I liked the idea of Frank Dalmar clouting you. And while I'm about it I may as well tell you that from here on out, there is no welcome for you at Big Five."

The lawyer's shadowed eyes burned.

"You bothered to come in here to tell me that?"

"No, but it is something I wanted to get off my chest. What I really came to see you about is Doc Jerome's affidavit on the real cause of Packy Lane's death. I want it."

Startled, Tunnison blurted: "You, too?"

"Yeah, me." Then Asbell caught him up quickly. "Somebody else has been after it? Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson?"

Tunnison retreated a little. "They're interested," he admitted cautiously. "Of course I wouldn't let them have it. It was entrusted to my care. So, you're out of luck, too."

"No!" Asbell said curtly. "I'm not out of luck. Doc Jerome didn't say Dalmar or Sampson could have it. But he did say I could. He told me to see you and get it from you."

"Your saying Doc said that still isn't authorization enough—"

"It's all the authorization I need," Asbell cut in. "You're stalling, Tunnison—and I don't know why you should. But I'm in no mood for stalling. I came for that affidavit and I'm going to get it. Where is it?"

Charley Tunnison's thoughts began to race a little frantically. Not half an hour ago, Bardo Sampson had been in this room with the same demand Asbell now made. There had been no offer of money in return for the affidavit, and when reminded of this fact, Bardo had cursed and threatened. Whereupon, Tunnison had flashed the same gun as he had on Jonas Dalmar, and drove Bardo from the room under the authority of it.

But what about Asbell? It wouldn't do, Tunnison knew, to throw a gun on him. That would be playing the hand all wrong. The tug-of-war he'd been having with Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson was one thing. Faced as he was now with Link Asbell's flat demand, was something else again. Which way to turn?

It was the instinct for politics in Charley Tunnison, to, if possible, always identify himself with the side which he figured carried the most weight. He knew exactly what Dalmar and Sampson intended, the full import and scope of their scheming. He knew how far that scheme had advanced, what irrevocable steps had already been taken. But the final issue was far from settled.

Earlier, along with the lawyer's supper, Husk Greeley had brought word of Frank Dalmar's clash with Wiley Goss, of Goss getting lead into Frank, and then being himself shot to death by Link Asbell. These facts, Husk Greeley had said, he'd gotten from Doc Jerome. And, concluded Tunnison now, they were facts to throw an altering light on things. That Frank Dalmar and Wiley Goss had gone to the gun, one against the other, suggested all was not what it might be inside Double Diamond. And any outfit, fighting within its own ranks, was hardly the soundest bet in the world.

On the other hand, the lengthening shadow of Link Asbell

TOUGH
now spreading all across the picture. How much en-
g substance did that shadow hold?
Charley Tunnison had never cared particularly for Link
Asbell, mainly because he saw him as an obstacle in the path
of his own secret schemes and ambitions. Such as some day
planting his hands on all that was Big Five, including the
brant, lovely girl who owned the ranch.
There was, in Link Asbell, Tunnison grudgingly admitted,
much of the same kind of fiber that had made Mike Vincent
such a tower of range influence in the past. The same hard-
headed adherence to facts, the same blunt way of stating
them, and the same basic, hard-cored toughness of mind and
spirit to face any fight or any odds, hard fisted and unafraid.
And these factors made any possessor of such a rough propo-
sition to bet against.

Who made Big Five go, these days? Link Asbell. Who
made Double Diamond go? Jonas Dalmar. But Jonas Dalmar
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fectly capable of handling those rough chores himself, as he
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Grudgingly, Charley Tunnison recognized the inevitable.
Gone now any chance of milking a thousand or two from
Jonas Dalmar and Bardo Sampson through the double-edged
deal he'd figured on. There was one consoling thought, how-
ever. Or rather, two of them. What a man had never ac-
tually possessed, he never actually missed. And there was still
time for the controlling factors in the Big Five and Double
Diamond clash to destroy each other, and so leave the game
open for gain, later on. In the meantime and for the
moment, it would seem that Big Five carried the weight. So
smart thing was to go along.

"The affidavit," Tunnison said, "is in the safe, over in
office. If you want it, you'll have to wait until I'm
enough to go there and open the safe."
"You're well enough now," Asbell said. "You can see
there's nothing wrong with your hands, which are what
open the safe with. Get some clothes on. If you need a

ing shoulder along the way, I'll loan you mine. That is, unless you want to give me the keys to the office and the safe. In which case you can stay in bed and feel sorry for yourself."

The harsh, relentless pressure of Asbell's words and purpose, stirred up a flare of anger in Tunnison.

"What kind of a damned Indian are you, anyhow? Haven't you any regard at all for a man's condition? Can't you wait until tomorrow? I'm still shaky as hell."

"I said I'd loan you my shoulder," Asbell told him remorselessly. "It's no great distancee to your office. And no, I can't wait until tomorrow. The affidavit might disappear by that time, what with so many interested in it. And while Doc Jerome could always swear to another one, it wouldn't carry quite the same authority as the voluntary one he made out the first time. As for the kind of Indian I am, well—somebody else started this thing, using damn rough rules. I'm going to finish it, using rougher ones, if that's the way it has to be. Get into some clothes!"

Sage Wingo reached town along Cross Street, turning into Center. As he did so he saw a light come on in Charley Tunnison's law office, and then two men move past that light into some further corner of the office. Recognition struck instantly. One of those men was Link Asbell!

Wingo had intended riding directly along to the Imperial. Now he hauled sharply up, twisting in his saddle as he tested the run of the starlit street. A few lights here and there. A saddle mount at the Prairie House hitch rack, another at the rail in front of the Imperial. Some granger's team and spring wagon stood in front of Henderson's store. Aside from these the town was empty and quiet.

At Wingo's right, an alley ran back between two darkened buildings, the mouth of it black with shadow. Into this he swung his horse, but after a little way he stepped down and ground reined the animal. After which, drawing his gun, he prowled back to the alley mouth, glance intent on that lighted office window yonder.

With bleak purpose he estimated the distance. Maybe

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twenty-five yards, no more. Not too far if a man pulled down carefully on a target limned against the light. This could be just like out at Double Diamond. A single careful shot, then into his saddle and out the back of the alley into the far night, with all debts evened and paid!

Wingo drew back the hammer of his gun, stood taut and ready.

In the Imperial, Bardo Sampson had taken on several drinks, sour and sullen in mood, rankling over what had happened in Charley Tunnison's hotel room. He had, as Jonas Dalmar suggested, tried to get a little rough with Tunnison, only to have the lawyer pull a gun from under the bed covers and order him out of the room.

All of which added up to another move that had gone wrong. So damn many things, Bardo concluded morosely, had gone wrong. The range coup he and Jonas Dalmar had planned seemed reasonably simple of achievement at the time. In practice, however, it had proven anything but simple.

The first big mistake had been in striking at the Big Five line camp up above Rosebud Canyon. That had merely alerted Big Five. The smart thing would have been to make certain of Link Asbell ahead of everything else. Because it was plain, and growing more so every passing day, that Asbell could be the stumbling block to spoil everything. Not only was he a tough one in his own right, but he had the gift of rallying others around him, as was proven this day when Tom Grant rode at his side to Double Diamond.

All along it had been Bardo's way to let Jonas Dalmar do the thinking, the planning. Jonas had always seemed quicker in the head than he. But had he proven fundamentally smarter? This was a thought Bardo was now turning over and over in his mind. By the way things were now shaping up, maybe Jonas Dalmar wasn't as smart as he'd thought him to be. Maybe his own big mistake was in first believing it was that way. In any event, Bardo was low in spirit and uncertain in mind. A final drink did not improve matters any, so he paid his score across Ben Dillon's bar, then stepped out into the night.

In Charley Tunnison's office the lawyer crouched down on one knee as he unlocked his safe, an old fashioned, heavily riveted one. Link Asbell stood beside him, watching. The lawyer selected the affidavit from a bundle of several other papers, closed and relocked the safe and stood up.

"Here it is," he said. And, now that he had decided he must accept the inevitable, he tried to inject some cordiality into his tone. "You know, Asbell, I'm half inclined to thank you for getting me out of bed. Damned if I don't feel the better for it."

Asbell did not answer, just stepped closer to the lamp on Tunnison's desk, where he unfolded the paper and began reading it.

Over across the street, when he saw Asbell's figure loom all and still against the light beyond the office window, Sage Wingo knew cold exultation and settled his gun in line for that careful shot.

And in the office, Charley Tunnison started to circle around Asbell and get behind the desk.

Several sounds came to Link Asbell in swift sequence. Almost as one was the tinkle of broken window glass and the muffled thud of a bullet striking living flesh. Outside, gun report rocketed along the street. While here, close beside him, Charley Tunnison gasped, mumbled some sort of fading incoherency, then collapsed to the floor.

Reaction came to Link Asbell on the instant. In a single long leap he was at the office door, had it open and was through it into night's sheltering blackness, barely ahead of a second slug which hammered a door post only inches behind his dodging shoulders.

WHEN BARDO SAMPSON, the reek of his final drink strong across his tongue, stepped from the Imperial bar, he saw something that brought him to a sharp halt, startled and curiously wondering. Yellow lamp glow shone from the window of Charley Tunnison's law office. Not so very long ago, when he'd come along the street from the Prairie House, that window had been dark, and the office obviously empty. Just as obviously, it wasn't empty now. Who was in there—and why?

Bardo moved to the corner of the Imperial, his protuberant eyes fixed on that lighted window with an angry staring. It had to be Tunnison who was in there. The damned shyster was up to something; likely enough, something to do with that affidavit paper. Either he had brought it to his office, or he'd got out of bed and come to the office after it.

Well, by God, Bardo vowed, here was where Mister Charley Tunnison got the surprise of his life! Right now he'd step in there and relieve Tunnison of that paper. And this time he'd be holding the gun. With the thought, Bardo slid the weapon free and stepped out into the street.

At that exact moment, from the mouth of the alley which ran back between Tim Deale's butcher shop and Mrs. Bel Hosmer's notions store for women, a gun blasted harsh report and in the lighted window yonder, glass shattered.

Bardo hauled up, wary and hard and startled, and for apace of a long breath or two, the night huddled in stun and silence. Then the door of Tunnison's office slammed open, and from it a dodging figure whirled into the sheltering shadow.

along the front of the building. From the alley, a second shot blared.

Brief as had been his glimpse of the dodging figure, Bardo recognized Link Asbell. And now, from that far wall shadow, a gun spiked the night with pale flame and flung the shout of its report rocketing across the rooftops of the town. From the alley came a third shot, and from the far shadows a second one.

Bardo had no idea who was in the alley, and he didn't particularly care. All he could think of was that if, between the other fellow and himself, they could lay Link Asbell dead in this street, this night, then a major obstacle would have been removed from the trail of Double Diamond's range desires. So, with the thought, Bardo bought in, throwing a shot at where Asbell's gun had flared.

The bullet struck where Asbell had been, but was no longer. For he was on the move, low crouched and shifting to his right. And in him a gray and merciless anger piled ever higher and higher.

Might God forever damn these sneaking killers who shot men from ambush, as they had old Packy Lanel Or in the back, as they had Nels Madison. Or from outer dark into a lighted room, like just now. Asbell knew that slug had been intended for him, not Charley Tunnison. It was just that Tunnison had, at a fateful second, stepped between him and the window.

Now Charley Tunnison was dead. Somehow, Asbell was certain of this. And whatever the lawyer's shortcomings, he did not deserve to die that way, not by a treacherous bullet from the dark.

There was, it seemed, a pair of the sneaking killers on the loose. The first two shots had come from the alley by Tim Deale's butcher shop, but the third came from further up street, toward the Imperial. And now, caught against the dull glow of the Imperial's windows, Asbell glimpsed the head and shoulders of a man, a man who was definitely trying to kill him.

He laid his gun in line with that hostile

shot. He peered past the blare of his gun and saw the man had disappeared. And then the great recklessness broke him and he was in the street, racing across it for the shadows on the far side.

Once more the gun at the alley mouth pounded report, and the bullet cut dust close to Asbell's speeding feet. He was holding his breath, his belly muscles pulled into a hard knot, as though they might resist bullet impact, should it come. But none did, and when he flattened his shoulders against the front of the butcher shop, in the belt of black shadow which lay there, he let his breath go in a long gust of relief. After which he edged toward the alley mouth.

In that alley a man was caught with panic. Sage Wingo had the dismal knowledge that he'd missed with every try, even this last time, with Asbell speeding across the street. He'd been upset by whoever it was that had bought in, up by the Imperial. Now the whole play was sour, with Asbell on this side of the street and closing in. The smart thing to do was get out of here, and fast!

Wingo whirled back into the alley depths after his horse. But the clatter and bellow of gunfire had the animal edging and when Wingo tried a grab for the reins, the horse sprang away. Wingo plunged after it, cursing.

At the corner of the butcher shop, Link Asbell listened a moment, then swung into the alley, close pressed against the south wall of it. And then, into the curdled black where a horse wheeled and trampled and its owner cursed, he drove a bullet.

The report, rolling heavy along the alley, decided it for the horse. It raced for the open night, and Sage Wingo, tired and desperate, came around and fired a final shot down the alley's narrowness.

Just to one side of the flare of Wingo's gun, Link Asbell placed one shot, then placed another a little to the other side. It was the second slug that counted. Under the impact, Sage Wingo's heavy head jerked backward and he fell instantly dead, the lead shattering its way through his forehead. Up at the Imperial, Ben Dillon came hurrying

street, wondering at the shooting and the cause for it. Just past the end of his hitch rack, he tripped over a sprawled and motionless figure. Down on one knee he scratched a match, and by its small flare, had his look. He swore in short, startled wonder. For he was looking into the dead face of Bardo Sampson.

Out at Running M headquarters the sunlight of a new day sprayed its bright cheer through window and open door. In the ranchhouse kitchen, Mandy Madison and Sue Vineent were combining forces in cooking, with Mandy wondering aloud if they dared feed Frank Dalmar some of the gruel she'd prepared for Nels, her husband.

The skirl of wheels and thump of trotting hoofs took Sue to the window.

"It's Doc Jerome," she announced. "He'll answer your question, Mandy."

When he came quietly into the kitchen, and just as quietly accepted a cup of coffee from Mandy, Sue thought she'd never seen Doc so sober and contained as now. Usually, he was the soul of bouncy cheeriness, but not this morning. Premonition stole through Sue, and she fixed Doc with a straight, searching glance.

"There's been more trouble, Doctor? Something else has happened?"

Doc nodded, drained his cup and put it on the table.

"Plenty has happened," he said, slowly grave. "A very savage night in town."

A great terror lashed through Sue.

"Link!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Doctor—not Link—?"

"No," Doc said gently. "not Link. He's all right. At least he is, physically. In mind and spirit, I couldn't say. I wo think he was bound to be badly bruised there, after go through what he did. But I may as well tell you all of it, it is the sort of thing best got over quickly."

So then he did tell them. He told of the deer that had stalked the street of Garrison town, the Told of how Charley Tunnison wa

by a bullet intended for Link Asbell's life, and told of how Bardo Sampson and Sage Wingo, in trying desperately for Asbell's life, ended up dying themselves. And finally, he told of how, while Garrison town was still in wild uproar over these grim facts, Joe Orr, the cook at Double Diamond, had ridden a foaming horse into town with the word that Jonas Dalmar lay dead out at Double Diamond, victim of the bullet of some unknown killer.

"Unknown, that is, until a later development turned up," Doc ended. "Wingo's horse, after spooking out of the alley, ended up hunting company at Jigger Henley's livery corral. Jigger discovered the animal and got the hunch to look through Wingo's saddlebags. In one of them he found a certain sack of money. Joe Orr recognized the sack. He said that more than once he'd seen Jonas Dalmar paying crew wages out of it."

"Then," said Mandy Madison, "it was Wingo who—who—"

"Hardly any doubt of it," Doc said. "He killed Jonas Dalmar, all right. How's Frank this morning? He awake?"

"Yes," Mandy nodded. "And I was wondering if we should feed him a little of the gruel I have for Nels?"

"I should think so," Doc said. "With the bad news he's got listen to, a little nourishment might help to offset it. Though over the long haul, he'll probably realize it has all been for the best. His father and Bardo Sampson were bound to start this trouble, and they've both paid the penalty. I don't believe Frank ever wanted any part of it. Well, now for a look at Nels. Then we'll take care of Frank."

Sue Vincent, listening to the bleak story as it unfolded, had moved to the kitchen window, stood staring out of it a little blindly, shocked and numbed by the grim portent of it all.

Dead men—dead men—!

All that Link Asbell had made prophecy of had happened, it seemed. And further back were the words of her father, grim old Mike Vincent, voicing in substance the same ending of a thing spawned in the depths of envy and hate and greed. Life, with its inevitable brutalities—!

She turned and questioned tautly.

"Is Link still in town, Doetor?"

Doe shook his head. "I thought I might find him here, for he headed up this way. He probably went right on along to Big Five."

Sue looked at Mandy Madison. "If I left for a while, would you mind?"

Deeply kind, supremely wise, Mandy answered warmly.

"My dear, of course I don't mind. I once heard my Nels say that when the chips were down, Link Asbell sat a mighty tough saddle. Be that as it may, the man's mortal, and right now he'll be needing understanding, Sue girl. So you run right along."

She rode at a reaching, distance-eating lope. Never, she thought, had she seen a fairer day. The sun was faultlessly bright, with the air full of fall's vitality and crispness. Over west, the Saddlebacks pitched solidly up, but they were softened and made luring by a blanket of lavender haze.

She watched eagerly as Big Five headquarters lifted from the plain and grew steadily closer. She saw Asbell's horse, still under saddle, standing by the corrals. She pulled up beside the buckskin, dismounted and crossed straight to the ranch office. There, as she had hoped, she found him.

He was slouched far down in his chair, his hat on the floor beside him. His eyes were sunken, deep shaded, a kind of fixed inexpressibility holding every facial feature. He had the look of a man who had been savagely beaten, but with all the bruises inside.

She stood, looking down at him, and slowly spoke.

"Doctor Jerome came out to Running M. He told us—all of it. Oh, Link—Link—what have you been through?"

"Hell!" he answered tonelessly. "Maybe you should have stayed at Running M. Frank Dalmar—he's got some tough listening ahead of him. His father being killed—and all."

"Yes," agreed Sue gravely, "he has that ahead of him. But I'm not concerned over Frank just now. I'm thinking about you—and what it has all done to you."

His shoulders lifted and fell in a faint shrug.

"I'll get over it. Time will take care of that. Given enough time a man can get over a lot of things. Even—even—" He paused and shook his head. "No," he went on, murmuring as if to himself, "no, there could never be enough time to forget the only one who ever counted."

He came to his feet abruptly and spoke with a quick roughness.

"I don't suppose that makes sense to you?"

She answered very steadily, very surely. "It makes all the sense I'll ever want to hear. Oh, Link—!"

Her mouth was very tender, her eyes deep-shining as she came straight to him.

"Frank," he protested. "I thought that maybe Frank Dalmar—?"

"I know you did," she cut in quickly. "But he never did count—that way."

"How long," he asked, a little later, "have you felt this way?"

"From the very first. From the day Dad hired you. Oh, I didn't realize it then, of course. And not fully until—until this trouble started. Then I knew. Then I knew it had been for always. Then I was sure, Link—so very sure!"

She burrowed a fragrant head against his shoulder.

The fixed tautness left him. His face softened and grew younger. Last night, and all that it held, was suddenly far, far away. It was like a bad dream, swift fading in the bright truthful light of day.

But this moment was real, and the girl in his arms was real and there was, it seemed, glory for a man in the world, after all.



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